

Consulting Social Media in the College Transition Process: Experiential Accounts of the Class of 2014

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Recommended Citation

Stageman, Amanda, "Consulting Social Media in the College Transition Process: Experiential Accounts of the Class of 2014" (2011).
Master's Theses (2009 -). Paper 83.
http://epublications.marquette.edu/theses_open/83

CONSULTING SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE COLLEGE TRANSITION PROCESS:
EXPERIENTAL ACCOUNTS OF THE CLASS OF 2014

by
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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School,
Marquette University,
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

May 2011

ABSTRACT
CONSULTING SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE COLLEGE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS:
EXPERIENTIAL ACCOUNTS OF THE CLASS OF 2014

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Marquette University, 2011

This study examines social media as a relevant marketing strategy for higher education institutions and seeks to better understand how incoming university students utilize social media to communicate with an academic institution and ultimately make a college attendance decision. A basic history of social networking websites is explored, with emphasis on how this new technology is used in public relations and marketing for non-profit organizations, such as colleges and universities. In order to understand social media use from the students' perspective, individual uses of social networking sites are examined through the lenses of uses and gratifications theory, online identity construction and community. As an innovator of social media strategy for academic institutions, Marquette University is used as the subject of study because of the school's major effort and commitment to connect with key stakeholders through social media websites. This study employs a triangulation of qualitative methods for data collection, including interviews with members of the Office of Marketing and Communication team, focus groups with new students and a textual analysis of the official incoming Marquette University student group on Facebook.

Results of the study indicate that social media sites were not a major influence in the student participants' decision of where to attend college. However, once they already knew where they would be attending college, university-sponsored social media resources were extremely helpful in easing the incoming students' transition from home life to campus life through early experiences of identity building, forming a personal network and two-way dialogue with school representatives. The insights derived from this study are useful in helping public relations professionals in higher education better understand and apply social media practices to build relationships with prospective and incoming students.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Amanda Stageman, B.A.

My sincerest thank you extends to all of the faculty members at Marquette University who served as my thesis committee. A special thank you to Dr. Kati Tusinski Berg, Dr. Gee Ekachai and Dr. Joyce Wolburg for contributing advice and expertise, constructive criticism and support throughout the completion of this thesis.

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Introduction

Technological advances are constantly shaping the way individuals communicate with each other and the way organizations communicate with their target audiences. Recently, social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr for example, have become among the most popular online communication platforms. Similar to online community predecessors, social media sites first gained popularity among individual users for reasons of communication, entertainment, information seeking, or other forms of personal gratification (Armstrong & Hagel, 1996). Now in addition to individual users, most organizations are recognizing that their brands are being discussed online, whether they are a part of the conversation or not. As a result, organizations in all types of industries are beginning to use social media sites as tools for “connecting, engaging and building relationships with clients, prospects and referral sources” (Gentry, 2009). In fact, Grunig (2009) argues, “practitioners view the new digital social media as a revolutionary force that changes the way they think and upsets the practice of public relations” (p. 1). For example, organizations can use social media sites to generate exposure and form opportunities through meaningful and valuable communication with contacts (Gentry, 2009). Additionally, clients and customers benefit from businesses using social media sites as tools because they get a sense of transparency, immediacy of communication, targeted communication and educational materials that “maintain a level of intimacy and unique personality” (Greenberg, 2009, p. 29).

Instead of jumping into social media use without much concern for strategy or understanding the resulting implications, industry experts are constantly trying to teach organizations how to embrace the new social media networks early on as a tool for connecting with targeted audiences. In a *Public Relations Quarterly* article, marketing veteran Andy Marken (2008) emphasizes the importance of social networks as an online environment where people of similar interests come together to “exchange information, ideas and problems on specific business, personal or professional topics,” which creates avenues for marketers to reach these users (p. 22). However, for-profit organizations are not the only ones that are starting to incorporate this innovation into their marketing efforts. Social media sites are becoming increasingly important communication tools for non-profit public relations professionals, who are often times working with a limited marketing budget (Curtis et al., 2010; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Waters, Burnett, Lamm & Lucas, 2009). Curtis et al. (2010) argues that non-profit organizations with “defined public relations departments are more likely to adopt social media technologies and use them to achieve their organizational goals” (p. 92). Additionally, social media technology use will become more common as public relations practitioners “become mindful of their effectiveness in regards to reaching target audiences, promoting a specific cause, and further developing communication strategies” (Curtis et al., 2010, p. 92). Social media tools also allow practitioners to “reach out to and engage their publics in conversation and also provide an avenue to strengthen media relations” (Eyrich, Padman & Sweetser, 2008, p. 412). Specifically, higher education institutions should have interest in the opportunities that social media sites provide

to streamline marketing functions, such as awareness, branding, promotions, education, volunteer interaction, audience identification, and quick audience feedback (Reuben, 2008; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009).

Recently, academic institutions have started to build a presence on social media sites as a strategy to connect with current students and to reach prospective students (Reuben, 2008). For example, Reuben (2008) argues that Twitter can be used for “awareness and branding, promoting your content, fast feedback, finding new audiences, and marketing – all areas marketers in higher education should have great interest in” (p. 5). Swartzfager (2007) and Wilburn (2008) have suggested additional uses for Twitter, such as “in emergency situations, such as school shootings, or using it in place of a live chat service for recruitment” (as cited in Reuben, 2008, p. 5). In November of 2007, Facebook created “the fan pages concept,” which allows users to become a fan of any type of organization or cause and “many universities jumped at the opportunity to create an official Facebook presence for their university” (Reuben, 2008, p. 3). Participation in two-way dialogue is one of the distinct features that differentiate social media sites from more traditional media. Reuben (2008) argues that social media “can assist in clearing up misconceptions and promote unsolicited, genuine positive feedback, which is invaluable to prospective students and marketers alike” allowing for more trust than traditional advertising would provide (p. 8).

One such academic institution that has been an innovator with social media activity is Marquette University. In addition to its traditional marketing channels, such as television advertising, printed literature, outreach to high schools, and

fundraising events, Marquette University maintains multiple official Twitter accounts, one Flickr account, one YouTube channel, and several official Facebook pages. These accounts receive a considerable amount of participation from online audiences, as observations in February 2011 revealed. The two main Twitter accounts (@MarquetteU and @MUAdmissions) have a combined total of 9,929 followers; the Marquette YouTube channel has received 398,244 total upload views and 342 unique subscribers; the Marquette University Flickr account holds 43 photo sets; and the official Marquette University Facebook pages (Marquette University, Marquette Parents, and Marquette Young Alumni) have a combined total of 14,856 fans and members, with these numbers constantly growing. It is important to note that these presented figures only represent official university-wide accounts and do not include social media sites that are managed by individual colleges or programs.

It is evident that Marquette University is extending a major effort and commitment to connect with key stakeholders through social media websites. What is not yet clear is the importance of these online interactions in the minds of the target audience and its impact on decision-making. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis project is to better understand how incoming university students, one of the institution's key stakeholder groups, use social media to communicate with an academic institution and ultimately make a college decision. As a result, this thesis will do two things: examine social media as a relevant strategy for higher education institutions and explain how one major audience group, incoming freshman, utilize social media to engage with a university.

Literature Review

The following review of relevant literature will provide a basic understanding of public relations practice, including the two-way symmetrical model of communication, and how the industry is evolving with the invention of new communication technologies, such as social media. The basic history of social networking websites will be explored, especially in terms of how they are beginning to be used in public relations and marketing for non-profit organizations, such as colleges and universities. To understand social media use from the students' perspective, individual uses of social networking sites will be examined through the lenses of uses and gratifications theory, online identity construction and community. The literature review will conclude by returning to public relations and marketing for colleges and universities, with special attention to how social media can be used with regard to university admissions, branding, and university community building.

Public Relations and Two-Way Communication

Public relations is a management function that uses planned and sustained efforts to influence public opinion, establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organization and its publics based on mutually satisfactory two-way communication (Seitel, 2007; Cain, 2009). The Public Relations Society of America formally defines public relations as the practice of "helping an organization and its public adapt mutually to each other" (Seitel, 2007). In general, public relations "covers a broad range of activities and purposes, and should always

be regarded as two-way and interactive, deliberate, intentional, planned and in the public interest” (Cain, 2009, p. 176). The term “publics” is what public relations practitioners use to refer to groups of audiences, specific groups that have an invested interest in the organization, or the general public (L’Etang, 2008).

In public relations practice, one-way communication models disseminate information to publics in a monologue approach, whereas two-way communication models exchange information in a dialogue approach (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). One of the most notable models of public relations is the two-way symmetrical model of communication. Using the two-way symmetrical model, the primary objective of public relations is understanding rather than persuasion because the two-way symmetrical model of communication “uses research to facilitate understanding and communication rather than to identify messages most likely to motivate or persuade publics” (Grunig & Grunig, 1992, p. 289). The two-way symmetrical model operates under the assumptions of truth telling, interpreting the organization and public to one another, and a mutual understanding of the viewpoints between both the organization’s management and employees and neighbors (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). When two-way symmetrical communication is used in daily public relations practice, “communicators use what they know about publics to negotiate win-win solutions to conflicts, building mutually beneficial relations with publics” (Dozier, Grunig & Grunig, 1995, p. 39).

For public relations practitioners, “most communication is achieved through the use of various technologies, such as the telephone, email, Internet and SMS, some mediated by public media, and some is direct fact-to-face communication

(L'Etang, 2008, p. 18). As communication technology advances, public relations practitioners must adapt and evolve their communication strategies to successfully reach and connect with key stakeholders. Recently, social media has changed the way in which public relations is practiced today. Social media platforms allow for the cultivation of communal relationships much more readily than traditional media. The public relations industry has quickly embraced social media because it allows organizations to reach stakeholders with transparency and authenticity while maintaining a level of intimacy and personality, which could contribute to a two-way symmetrical communication approach (Greenberg, 2009).

Social Networking Sites

Social media are communication channels that require user participation and user supplied content (Waters, 2009). They allow users to find communities of other people with similar passions based on interests, activities, political views, or lifestyles (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Harden & Heyman, 2009). More specifically, Boyd and Ellison (2008) define social networking sites as:

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site (p. 211).

Online communities began in the 1970s, long before the Internet was a household experience, with government researchers and academicians who would hold research results discussions (Harden & Heyman, 2009). Since their beginning, social networking sites have come along way and “have attracted millions of users, many

of whom have integrated these sites into their daily practices” (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p.210). Now more than ever, social networking sites break down the geographical divide between individuals who share similar interests throughout the world, as users are able to communicate through tools such as blogs, forums, wikis, user-generated sites, picture and video sharing sites, and podcasts (Weinberg, 2009). Social networking sites have become among the most popular sites on the Internet, as new generations are even more digital savvy than the ones before (Weinberg, 2009). According to Vollmer and Precourt (2008), “96 percent of U.S. students between the ages of 9-17 who are online have used social networking technology to connect with their peers” (p. 64). Today, among the most popular social networking sites are Facebook and Twitter, with approximately 500 million and 200 million registered users worldwide respectively (Chaing, 2011; Facebook.com).

Liebrenz-Himes, Dyer and Shamma (2009) name Facebook and Twitter as among some of the most influential social networking websites. Mark Zuckerberg, A former Harvard student created Facebook in 2004 and registered more than 30 million users within its first three years of operation (Liebrenz-Himes, Dyer & Shamma, 2009). When it was first developed, Facebook targeted college students by allowing them to connect with other users in their school’s network. However, in 2005, “Facebook expanded to include high school students, professionals inside corporate networks, and, eventually, everyone” (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 218). Facebook allows users to create a personal profile, share personal information, pictures, or status updates, send private messages, identify with a network

(geographic regions, schools, companies, etc.), post messages on friends' "walls," establish friendships, use applications, and become a "fan" of different pages (Feldner & D'Urso, 2007; Ruben, 2008).

For students today, Facebook has become a significant factor in the college experience, as "it is estimated that approximately 85 percent of college student have a Facebook profile" (Feldner & D'Urso, 2007, p. 3). Research indicates that Facebook is often used to maintain or solidify offline relationships (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). For example, when students go off to college, as many as 90 percent use Facebook to keep in touch with high school friends or old classmates (Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman & Tong, 2008). Another example of how students regularly use Facebook is to learn more about new acquaintances that are met offline at their new school, especially checking for common friends or interests (Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman & Tong, 2008). Surprisingly, research suggests that Facebook is used more often to maintain existing relationships rather than browsing for new people to meet. According to the Pew Research Center, 91 percent of U.S. teenagers who use social networking sites, such as Facebook, do so to connect with pre-existing friends from offline relationships (Boyd & Ellison, 2008).

Another popular social networking site is Twitter. Twitter is a micro-blogging website that allows users to post information in 140 characters or less. "Twitter users can follow the updates of friends they 'follow,' send them direct messages, reply publicly to friends, or just post questions or comments as their current status" (Reuben, 2008, p. 5). Since its launch in 2006, Twitter has registered over 106 million users that produce 55 million tweets per day with an additional

600 million search queries per day (Yarow, 2010). From its launch in 2006, Twitter has consistently outpaced other social networking sites, such as Facebook, with a growth rate of 343 percent (Buss & Strauss, 2009).

Social Media and Universities

Reuben (2008) conducted an independent survey that specifically sought to understand how colleges and universities are using social media, in general, to promote their schools. Responses were collected from 148 different four-year colleges and universities. The majority of the respondent schools were in the United States (94.3%), although a few responses also were collected from schools in Australia (1.7%), Canada (2.9%), and New Zealand (1.1%) (p. 6). The responding schools reported that “just over half (53.79%) of the colleges and universities reported having an official Facebook page for their campus, and 20 of the schools have developed a custom application for Facebook” (p. 6). When asked about who is responsible for maintaining any utilized social media accounts, “respondents reported that the overwhelming majority of these tools are maintained by one or more individuals in their marketing communications or public relations office” and this was the case for “every form of social media questioned in the survey” (p. 6). Of the schools that responded, 48.11% responded that the marketing communications or public relations office maintains their Facebook page, as opposed to 13.21% of the schools that reported the undergraduate admissions office maintains their Facebook page, or 11.32% of the schools that reported that the alumni office or Web development office maintained their Facebook page (Reuben, 2008). Reuben also

reported that “most of the schools reported using Facebook as a tool for communicating with current students, to reach out to alumni, and for recruitment,” and on average spent about 1-4 hours per week maintaining the page (p. 6).

Out of the 42 respondents who reported using an official Twitter account for their school, half (50%) reported that the account is updated by their marketing and communications or public relations offices (p. 6). Additionally, half (50%) of the respondents reported using the official Twitter account “to communicate with current students” while the other half (50%) reported using the account “to reach out to alumni” (p. 6). The majority of respondents who reported using an official Twitter account reported that they “update their Twitter status one to four times per week” (p. 6). Based on survey results, Reuben (2008) estimates that colleges and universities that utilize social media should “expect to spend anywhere from 1 to 10 hours per week using social media as part of the marketing mix, depending on how many tools are used, how actively they are used by the audiences, and how extensive the school’s presence is in each” (p. 8).

Although social media sites provide a wealth of opportunity for both for-profit and non-profit organizations, a 2009 content analysis of nonprofit organizations that have Facebook profiles yielded surprising results. After analyzing 275 random, legally registered nonprofit organizations on Facebook, Waters, Burnett, Lamm and Lucas (2009) found that a majority of the nonprofit organizations were not taking full advantage of all the relationship cultivation opportunities that the social networking site offered. However, educational organizations were found to be the most active non-profits on Facebook with regard

to fundraising efforts conducted online. Nonprofits, including colleges and universities, will likely be influenced by stakeholders' needs and expectations as social media sites become more widely spread and incorporated into daily life among a more diverse audience (Waters, Burnett, Lamm & Lucas, 2009).

As Waters et al. predicted, social media use in higher education has dramatically increased since the 2009 nonprofit study. According to Lavrusik (2009a), "universities are constantly exploring new ways to use social media to fulfill their missions of engaging and sharing knowledge with constituents" (p. 1). These new strategies shift some of the focus from mainstream media to community engagement via social media tools, which allow universities to reach thousands of interested people directly and build brand visibility at the same time (Lavrusik, 2009a). Some of the ways in which colleges and universities are using social media for public relations include: "gathering and sharing information, showcasing student and faculty work, providing a platform to broadcast events, for emergency notifications, connecting people, producing content, and creating a dialogue and communicating to students" among other strategies (Lavrusik, 2009a). Universities are also able to use social media to engage alumni in discussions regarding jobs, organizing local alumni events, connecting with current students and fundraising (Lavrusik, 2009b).

Following the recent popularity that academic institutions have experienced on social media websites such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and LinkedIn, providing geo tracking services, such as Foursquare, seems to be the next step for university public relations. Foursquare is a mobile application that is used

“primarily for letting friends know where a user is and figuring out where friends are” (Saint, 2010, p.1). The secondary purpose of Foursquare is to collect points, electronic badges and coupons for visiting restaurants, stores and all other types of locations (Saint, 2010). Since its recent launch, Foursquare has already gained about 275,000 users (Saint, 2010). As a result of the recent popularity among users and higher education marketers, Foursquare has begun targeting colleges and universities with its new “Foursquare for Universities program, designed to help students, alumni, and staff share information about classes, building hours, campus activities and traditions,” (Indvik, 2010, p.1). While participating in the geosocial service, students can receive virtual badges by “checking in” on their mobile phone at different locations or events happening around campus (Indvik, 2010). According to O’Dell (2011), “the idea behind the partnership is to help students connect with colleagues, friends and professors through the app and to help campus visitors find their way around interesting and useful on-campus locations” (p. 1).

Although social media applications are starting to become integrated into the mix of public relations tactics and overall social media strategy of colleges and universities, it is necessary for public relations practitioners to understand the individual users’ needs that drive social media use in the first place. The next section will examine media use at the individual level through the lens of uses and gratifications theory.

Social Media and Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and gratifications theory was originally developed by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974) to understand how audiences engaged with some of the first forms of media, such as the newspaper and radio (Ruggerio, 2000). In its most basic form, “uses and gratifications focuses on: (1) the social and psychological origins of (2) needs, which generate (3) expectations of (4) the mass media or other sources, which lead to (5) differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in (6) need gratifications and (7) other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones” (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974, p. 510). Uses and gratifications research differs from early media effects research by “shifting the focus to what people do with the media, instead of what the media do to people” (Bryant & Oliver, 2009, p.168). Furthermore, uses and gratifications research seeks to understand the motivations behind how audiences use the media, assuming that viewers are active choosers of what media that they use to satisfy their needs (Bryant & Thompson, 2002).

In order to best understand how individuals use media, Bryant and Thompson (2002) proposed that it is best to start by examining how the mass media functions at the societal level. In general, “media keep viewers aware of what is going on in the world around them by surveying the environment” (p. 128). The mass media also “help audience members to make sense of it all,” by providing a correlation of environmental parts, which helps the audience to form a viewpoint, and by transmitting social norms and customs to younger generations (p. 128). Uses and gratifications researchers have also identified additional functions of the media,

including entertainment (Wright, 1960), parasocial interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956), escapism (Pearlin, 1959), anxiety reduction (Mendelsohn 1963) and play (Stephenson, 1967) (as cited in Bryant and Thompson, 2002). Similar to societal level functioning, Lacey (2002) proposes that the most common media functions for the individual level, including personal identity, information, entertainment and social interaction.

Uses and gratifications theory operates with a few assumptions. The biggest assumption is the role of an active audience with “behavior that is largely goal directed and purposive” (Bryant & Oliver, 2009, p.167). However, Windahl (1981) argued, “audience activity covers a range of possible orientations to the communication process, a range that varies across phases of the communication sequence” (as cited in Levy & Windahl, 1984, p. 73). More specifically, “different individuals tend to display different types and amounts of activity in different communication settings and at different times” (Ruggiero, 2000, p. 8). In fact, motives can be proactive or passive, ritualized or instrumental (Bryant & Thompson, 2002). In regard to this claim, researchers have developed “theoretical active audience models that range from high audience activity to low levels of involvement” and are based on “conditions such as confinement to home, low income, and some forms of stress,” for example (Ruggiero, 2000, p. 8). Additionally, “factors such as different time relations (advance expectations, activity during the experience, post exposure), variability of involvement (as background noise, companionship), and ritualistic or habitual use (as mild stimulation) suggest a much less active audience than traditionally believed” (Ruggiero, 2000, p. 9). More active

audience concepts are “gaining credibility with new media researchers as emerging technologies provide users with a wider range of source selection and channels of information,” and therefore allowing individuals to select media tools that are most important to that individual (Ruggiero, 2000, p. 19). Specifically, scholars are naming the Internet as “the ultimate in individualism, with the capability to empower the individual in terms of both the information he or she seeks and the information he or she creates” (Singer, 1998, p. 10 as cited in Ruggiero, 2000).

Other uses and gratifications theory assumptions have to do with the relationship between individual need gratifications and the media. Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974) provide additional assumptions of uses and gratifications theory. For example, uses and gratification theory assumes that “in the mass communication process much initiative in linking need gratification and media choice lies with the audience member” (p. 511). Another assumption is that the mass media compete with other sources of need satisfaction within the wider range of human needs (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). Lastly, uses and gratifications theory assumes that “people are sufficiently self-aware to be able to report their interests and motives in particular cases, or at least to recognize them when confronted with them in intelligible and familiar verbal formulation” and therefore most uses and gratifications data is self reported (p. 511).

As with all models and theories, uses and gratifications theory has received some criticisms. The most common are that the theory is too individualistic, it lacks clarity among key concepts, that different researchers use differing definitions for key concepts, that the use of self reporting is unreliable, and finally that the active

audience is assumed (Bryant & Thompson, 2002). Lacey (2002) argues that it is an “unrealistic perspective” to assume that “individuals have complete autonomy from the media” (p. 170). Additionally, Lacey (2002) argues that uses and gratifications theory “focuses on the mental states of individuals; something we can never know about anyone else (and often do not know about ourselves)” and that “it focuses on individuals while audiences are usually made up of groups; our behavior and understanding of texts is different when we are part of a group” (Lacey, 2002, p.171).

Scholars have argued that uses and gratifications research will have even more relevance with new technologies. Ruggiero (2002) argues, “as new technologies present people with more and more media choices, motivation and satisfaction become even more crucial components of audience analysis” (p. 14). Moreover, “new media posses at least three attributes of data not commonly associated with traditional media: interactivity, demassification and asynchronicity” (p. 15). Interactivity seems to be a crucial aspect of interest to uses and gratifications researchers because “it may offer users the means to develop new means of communication and greatly increase user activity” (Dyson 1993, as cited in Ruggiero, 2000, p. 15). According to Williams, Rice and Rogers (1988) “interactivity significantly strengthens the core of uses and gratification notion of active user because it has been defined as the degree to which participants in the communication process have control over, and can exchange roles in their mutual discourse” (p. 10). Newhagen and Rafaeli (1996) also “theoretically positioned the Internet as a legitimate subject of mass communication and social science research

and called for a uses and gratification approach to investigate the medium” (Ruggiero, 2000, p. 22).

Online Identity Construction

In addition to gratifying needs and providing benefits such as interactivity and demassification, new media technologies also provide users with the opportunity “to engage in self-selecting identity construction behaviors” (Feldner & D’Urso, 2008, p. 5). According to Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, and Moris (2002), identity claims “are symbols that have shared meanings to make statements to others about how they would like to be regarded” (as cited in Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008, p. 34). In general, identity is the constantly shifting “story individuals tell of whom they are” based on “culturally available meanings in everyday situations” (Feldner & D’Urso, 2008, p. 8; Kondo, 1990). Identity is “one’s internal self-definition with regard to our traits, values, beliefs, and the social roles we play” (Chayko, 2008, p. 159). Considering that self-identity is often built through interactions with others, “both the internal development and external presentation of our selves – and in a larger sense, our identities – takes place in communities” (Chayko, 2008, p.159). For social media users on sites such as Facebook or Twitter, there is an active process of self-positioning for how other users will view them within society (Feldner & D’Urso, 2008). New technologies aid in the effort to create and manage personal expressions that are believed to convey certain perceptions of the self, in the hope that others will see the same conveyed message (Chayko, 2008). As social networking sites have proven to be “so well suited to these tasks, there has

been an explosion of self-development and self-expression online” (Chayko, 2008, p. 159). Online identity formation can be especially helpful for shy teenagers, who have not yet developed the comfort of expressing their true feelings in normal conversation, to build self-esteem and develop social relationships that might be difficult to cultivate in person (Barnes, 2001). For University Admissions personnel, social networking sites can provide an opportunity to connect with and begin to build a relationship with prospective students, especially shy prospective students, during a time of stressful transition into college life.

University Admissions and Community

According to Cook and Rushton (2009), “transition can be a complex and daunting experience, and one which [university administrators] need to understand more effectively in order to support students constructively” and positively impact future student engagement (p. 183). Prospective students who report feeling overwhelmed with information and who are unable to cope with subsequent transition and new demands tend to “struggle to make sense of their expectations of what university life will be like” (Cook & Rushton, 2009, p. 183). As a result, these types of students are more likely to leave their university program early (Cook & Rushton, 2009). In addition to failing to make sense of university life expectations or struggling with the new transition, other causes for students to leave a program early include: “academic under preparedness, academic boredom, uncertainty about long-term goals, irrelevance of university curriculum, social isolation, low commitment to persist, and finance” (Cook & Rushton, 2009, p. 2). Ideally, issues

such as being overwhelmed with information, difficulties with the transition to university life, isolation, and a disconnect between student expectation and actual early experiences could potentially be preventable with the help of high university-student interactions levels prior to the new student's arrival to campus. As such, Cook and Rushton (2009) suggest that university personnel "utilize available technologies to provide effective and targeted support to students during their crucial transition into higher education" (p. 183). Examples of support would include providing relevant, up-to-date information, answering questions, and providing the opportunity for students to interact with other new students or current students on social networking sites. As a result, "early identification of students' expectations can help both student and institution get to know each other better and address any potential areas of discord at an early stage, as well as help students feel more involved in the university prior to arrival" (Cook & Rushton, 2009, p. 185). Most importantly, social networking communities can provide students with an open and trusting environment in which they can relate to their peers who are experiencing the same transition.

Branding and Online Communities

Online communities can serve as a trusting and supportive environment in which to establish relationships (Chayko, 2008). In fact, trust may develop surprisingly quickly in online communities because "the tendency to disclose personal information anonymously can lead to familiarity and self-disclosure" (p. 52). As a result, social networking communities provide users with the opportunity

to easily connect with others (Chayko, 2008). In the case of colleges and universities, building a brand connection with prospective students is an important step in developing a bond with that student. According to Buss and Strauss (2009), emotional brand experiences are fundamental in increasing brand visibility and awareness among stakeholders, or in this case, students. Kevin Roberts, CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi is credited for inventing the term “lovemarks” for brands that are able to identify and develop a deep relationship with their stakeholders (Buss & Strauss, 2009). When a person uses a lovemark, he or she is “expressing social identity, who he or she is, the group to which he or she belongs or wants to belong, and his or her place within a community” (p. 153). This expression of group identity within a community is what makes social networking sites, such as Facebook or Twitter, the ideal platforms for lovemark expressions. If a user is connected to a specific brand on a social networking site, it is a signal to others about your identity through what the brand’s image represents (Buss & Strauss, 2009). Additionally, social networks can be used to share the same brand passion with others. Ultimately, lovemarking via social networks “works better for products that can become a part of the user’s everyday life and that awaken strong emotions,” such as colleges or universities (Buss & Strauss, 2009).

Based on the literature reviewed, social media tools seem to provide colleges and universities with an opportunity to streamline current marketing functions and engage with target audiences. The high levels of individual social media use among the age group of prospective students combined with the opportunity for the expression of group identity and emotional brand experiences are factors that help

create the potential for a highly successful partnership between social networking platforms and higher education marketing. As more public relations practitioners and marketing professionals begin to realize the opportunity to increase brand visibility and awareness among stakeholders, social media use in higher education has continued to dramatically increase in recent years.

Research Questions

An example of one academic institution that has seemed to fully cultivate the impact of social media use into the overall marketing strategy is Marquette University. The University maintains multiple official Twitter accounts, a Flickr account, a YouTube channel, and several official Facebook pages and groups. The accounts are highly active and garner a considerable amount of participation from online audiences. As of February 2011, two of the main University Twitter accounts (@MarquetteU and @MUAdmissions) had a combined total of 9,929 followers; the Marquette YouTube channel has received 398,244 total upload views and 342 unique subscribers; the Marquette University Flickr account holds 43 photo sets; and the official Marquette University Facebook pages have a combined total of 14,856 fans and members, without including any of the numbers that are behind social media accounts managed by individual colleges or programs.

Marquette University uses social media websites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, to connect with students, faculty, and alumni. What is not yet clear is the importance of these online interactions in the minds of incoming students. The purpose of this thesis project is to examine social media as a strategy for

universities and colleges in connecting with stakeholders and better understand how incoming students utilize social media to communicate with the academic institution. Therefore, this paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What social media strategies does Marquette University utilize to connect with key stakeholders, such as prospective or incoming students?
2. For what purposes do potential students access official university social media sites (i.e. what were the needs) and which sites were most commonly used?
3. What gratifications did incoming students receive from using official university social media sites?
4. What role did social media play in the students' decision to attend the university?
5. What role did social media have in the students' overall transition from high school and home life to university life?

Method

Considering that one of the main goals of this thesis project is to better understand the strategy behind Marquette University's social media efforts and incoming students' experience, attitudes and feelings toward using the University's social media resources prior to coming to campus, three main qualitative research methods were used for data collection: interviews, focus groups and textual analysis.

Qualitative methods allow researchers to better understand participants' feelings, beliefs, and attitudes toward a particular topic and study behaviors in a

natural setting (Hocking, Stacks, & McDermott, 2003). Additionally, qualitative researchers aim “to preserve and analyze the situated form, content, and experience of social action,” as words, nonverbal gestures, and body language are incorporated into the data analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 18). Qualitative methods “allow the researcher to understand and feel how the participants felt as they were involved in an ongoing event” (Hocking, Stacks, & McDermott, 2003, p. 194). Interviews are a common communication research methodology in which participants are asked to orally provide information about their own beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors regarding a certain topic (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000). A common type of interviewing technique is a semistructured interview, in which “interviewers ask a set of basic questions on the interview schedule, but they are free to ask probing follow-up questions as well, usually to gather specific details or more complete answers” (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000, p. 101). Some of the major advantages of interviews are that they provide researchers with a depth of knowledge about the respondent, allow for clarification and follow-ups, and allow the researcher to observe both verbal and nonverbal behavior of respondents (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000).

Another commonly used qualitative method within communication and marketing research that is similar to interviewing is the focus group method (Lederman, 1990). Focus groups are used to interview a small group of people at the same time in order to identify attitudes, feelings, values, behaviors, and motivations concerning a specific product, service, or subject area (Hocking, Stacks & McDermott, 2003). In addition to allowing the researcher to have limited control over the group discussion, focus groups provide a quick, efficient, and relatively

inexpensive way to gather rich data (Mitofsky, 1999; Wimmer & Dominick, 1997; Hocking, Stacks, & McDermott, 2003). The information that participants provide during focus groups discussions is valuable to a researcher because it often contains detailed explanations that cannot be obtained by quantitative methods (Hocking, Stacks, & McDermott, 2003).

Although focus groups are a quick and efficient way to gather rich data about incoming students' attitudes, feelings, values and behaviors toward Marquette University's social media resources in detailed explanations, they only offer information regarding one small, specific group of the entire demographic that is under study. Methodological triangulation can be helpful in providing an increased understanding of the phenomenon through varying perspectives (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000). Therefore, a textual analysis was conducted of the official Class of 2014 Facebook group in order to better understand the nature of communication within the group. According to Frey, Botan and Kreps (2000), textual analysis is "used to describe and interpret the characteristics of a recorded message" on visual texts or conversations on Internet sites, for example (p. 225). Textual analysis seeks to understand the nature of the communication and "describe the content, structure, and functions of the messages" in order to better understand the phenomenon of interest (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000).

Interview Procedures

Prior to focus group recruitment and facilitation, interviews were conducted with key players in Marquette's office of marketing and communication to gain

background knowledge on the topic. In order to best understand how Marquette University utilizes a social media strategy to engage with and build relationships with stakeholders, interviews were conducted with five different professionals who are responsible for the social media strategy and have first-hand knowledge and experience with social media at Marquette University. The respondents represented relevant departmental positions that have the most first-hand experience with social media at Marquette University, such as the Vice President of Marketing and Communication, a Communications and Social Media Specialist, the Director of Interactive Marketing, and an Undergraduate Admissions Counselor. One 45-minute interview was conducted with each respondent, with the potential for up to 30 minutes of follow-up via either e-mail or telephone when it was necessary (see the appendix for interview protocol). After transcriptions were produced of each interview, the constant comparative method was used to determine key themes behind Marquette University's strategic social media plan. Constant comparative method "creates and compares exhaustive categories that explain the data" (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000, p. 281; Hocking, Stacks, & McDermott, 2003). The key themes behind Marquette University's strategic social media plan, as determined by the analysis, will be discussed in detail in the results section of this paper.

Focus Group Recruitment

The inclusion criteria for participants were college freshman from the Marquette University Class of 2014 who are at least 18 years of age. Using a convenience sample and snowball technique, focus group participants were

recruited through fliers posted around campus and a class announcement in a large, introductory communication lecture. The researcher's email address was included in the advertisements and announcements for potential participants to contact for additional information. Free pizza and refreshments were offered as an incentive for participation. Students from the Introduction to Communication course were also offered extra points for study participation from their professor. Both students who were light and heavy users of social media, as well as students from all areas of study, were invited to participate in order to attain a range of feelings about the topic. Once participants were recruited, email was used as the primary means of correspondence for scheduling and sending reminders to the participants.

Focus Group Sample and Procedure

In total, 13 people were recruited to participate in the study. After one individual dropped out of the study prior to participating in one of the focus groups, the recruitment generated 12 participants. Each of the participants was at least 18 years of age and was a freshman at Marquette University, including eight female students and four male students. The sample included a range of ethnicities. Two separate focus groups were held, containing six participants in each one. According to the literature, the ideal number of participants for a focus group ranges between five and 10 participants in order for the facilitator to create discussion and identify themes and disagreements within answers without being overwhelmed (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002; Hocking, Stacks, & McDermott, 2003). Therefore, each focus group contained a desirable number of participants.

As previously stated, two separate focus groups were conducted, containing six participants in each one. The focus groups were held at different times during different days of the week to accommodate the students' schedules. As a general rule, at least two focus groups is needed in order to allow for comparison of responses between the group, allowing the researcher to find similarities and differences (Hocking, Stacks, & McDermott, 2003). Each focus group was videotaped and audiotaped in order for the researcher to record body language, facial expressions, gestures and differences in attention, as well as to provide a transcription of the events (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). At the beginning of each focus group, the researcher provided a general overview of the session, including what participants could expect, a review of confidentiality and anonymity, informing participants about their rights, and providing a chance for participants to ask any questions. Participants were asked to start by introducing themselves and share where they're from as a way to break the ice before the researcher moved on to the scripted questions (see appendix for focus group protocol).

Each focus group lasted approximately 60 minutes. After both of the focus groups were completed, transcripts were produced for each of the sessions. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to each of the participants and used throughout all transcriptions. The transcripts were then analyzed using constant comparative method, which "creates and compares exhaustive categories that explain the data" (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000, p. 281; Hocking, Stacks, & McDermott, 2003). Varalo, Ray and Ellis (1998) describe analytic induction as "a method of analysis where collection, coding and analysis of data are all inextricably bound up

with each other” (p. 260). Using constant comparative method and analytic induction, the data were analyzed to identify reoccurring patterns and organize the significant points in the focus group transcripts that could potentially answer the previously stated research questions. The resulting themes are presented in the following results section.

Textual Analysis Procedure

The official Class of 2014 Facebook group was specifically chosen for the textual analysis within this study because the participants’ frequent use of the Facebook group was a commonly occurring discussion in both of the focus groups, as discussed in greater detail in the results section of this paper. Posts or conversations appearing on the “wall” of the group were randomly selected to be analyzed by selecting every tenth message appearing over the span of one year, from November 2009 until November 2010. The number of selected posts or messages to be analyzed totaled 208 unique conversations. Similar to the interviews procedure, the selected conversations were then analyzed using a qualitative constant comparative approach, which focuses on reoccurring patterns and major themes contained within the text (Frey, Botan and Kreps, 2000). Qualitative textual analysis seeks to understand the nature of the communication and “describe the content, structure, and functions of the messages” in order to better understand the phenomenon of interest (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000). The resulting themes are presented in the following results section of this paper.

Results: Interviews

Interviews conducted with key players in Marquette's office of marketing and communication provided helpful foundational information to better understand the strategy behind Marquette's social media efforts. Interview participants included Tim Cigelske, Social Media Coordinator in the Office of Marketing and Communication, Leah Strong, Undergraduate Admissions Counselor, Tom Pionek, Director of Interactive Marketing, and Tricia Geraghty, Vice President of Marketing and Communication at Marquette. According to Marquette University's strategic social media plan, the key target audiences include prospective students, current students, alumni, and parents. The goals of the strategic social media plan are to build awareness for the Marquette brand online, to build a sense of community among target audiences, and to foster word of mouth communication. From a strategic perspective, Marquette seeks to disseminate information and tell stories via social media outlets including Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and YouTube, that will engage multiple key audiences. Specifically, the social media plan seeks to achieve the following objective: to achieve interaction from five percent of the audience within a given channel in any month and to garner 35,000 people on all University accounts. In the beginning, the initial goal of the University's social media campaign was "just to be an active player in it and build a sense of community – things that would characterize more broadly what the Office of Marketing and Communication is about and social media was seen as an extension of that" (Geraghty, personal communication, September 16, 2010). However, now the marketing and communication team measures effectiveness based on interaction rates on all social

media accounts, keeping in mind how the metrics fit within the bigger context. For example, major campus events, such as the announcement of a new University President, tend to increase interaction rates. Although the marketing and communication team uses specific goals and strategies for social media in the strategic planning process, an important focus for the team is to make sure that all social media efforts fit seamlessly with any other marketing tactics. According to Cigelske, Social Media Coordinator, the social media efforts that Marquette employs should always be used as an extension of what the University is already doing in terms of marketing:

“I think one of the most important things to keep in mind with social media is that it is not something separate from everything else that you do. I think that, while social media acts differently – it’s faster than other forms of communication and it can amplify things and it can build a pretty visible community, which might be unique to social media – you should have the same goals in social media that you do elsewhere. So basically whatever else you’re doing in different aspects of the business or university, it should just be reflected in social media” (personal communication, March 22, 2011).

For example, when Marquette sponsored its annual “National Marquette Day” this year, social media tactics were incorporated into an integrated campaign that used many different branches of promotion. Although social media served as a major component for promoting National Marquette Day, there were also many in-person aspects, such as costume contests, games, campus visits and prize giveaways. The combination of both online and in-person promotions helped to create an exciting University event that engaged alumni and current students, as well as helped prospective students get involved and excited about Marquette University.

Although social media is often used in combination with other large integrated campaigns for the University, there are times when special content is

created solely for social media. For example, specific social media tactics are often posted on various social media outlets and specialized groups and forums. One of these specialized groups is the official Class of 2014 Facebook group, which will be explored further in-depth. After interviewing the four key players who are primarily responsible for the planning and implementation of Marquette University's strategic social media plan, four key topics emerged: engagement, dialogue, bridging of information and community.

Engagement

According to Pionek, Director of Interactive Marketing, Marquette's social media strategy started with a simple marketing principle in mind: go to where the audience is. Marquette's marketing team understood the value of creating content that the University's target audiences would find engaging:

“Our department started to recognize a need for engagement in social media and it stems primarily from the fact that we knew our audience, or parts of our audience were engaged in social media...We decided we needed to get engaged and the way to do it right was probably to have a communication plan around it and understand what we're doing” (personal communication, April 9, 2010).

In fact, the marketing team believed that creating relevant, interesting content for this specific communication channel was so vital for the success of Marquette's social media brand, that the Social Media Coordinator for the school was hired based on journalism and storytelling experience, rather than simply having the most up-to-date technology skills:

“We said from the very beginning, from a strategic perspective, that the primary skill set we needed in this was not the technology, it was the person who had storytelling ability and who knew about content and what would be interesting to people. So we really set out to hire somebody who was

probably coming with a reporting or journalism background or a communications background and we needed them to be really savvy and knowledgeable about how to use new media, but the trump skill was to be understanding of story and emotion and connecting people and building community” (Geraghty, personal communication, September 16, 2010).

When social media content is successful, open dialogue between the University and current or prospective students is often the result.

Dialogue

In addition to creating relevant and interesting content that the target audience would respond to, the marketing and communication team also discussed the importance of creating dialogue. Whether the target audience is reacting to posted content or reaching out to the school on their own, allowing the opportunity for open dialogue was another important issue that was discussed by the interview participants. One specific example of how Marquette University often creates and fosters dialogue is through viral videos. According to Pionek, Director of Interactive Marketing:

“[The marketing team] occasionally produces stuff that is just directly for social media... like remixed reactions from social media into a video – which I think is just brilliant on extending the dialogue. You have an event, Father Wild retiring, we do the announcement, we post the video of the speech, people react, then [a marketing and communication team member] takes the reactions and makes a video, posts [that video] and people react again. It’s a great dialogue” (personal communication, April 9, 2010).

Cigelske, Social Media Coordinator for Marquette, also shared a specific example of how Marquette uses social media to foster dialogue and connect people within the Marquette community:

“Last summer, people started talking about being excited to get back on campus or looking forward to coming to Marquette for the first time. They

would send these tweets out saying things like, ‘I can’t wait to be on campus’. I started seeing these pop up over and over again so I started taking screen shots of them. It was a mixture of current students and new students. I created a video featuring all of the quotes and called it ‘Welcome to Marquette.’ Things like that help to show some sense of excitement from a big community of people” (personal communication, March 22, 2011).

In addition to sharing excitement and bonding with other students, this type of open discussion also allows students, especially prospective students, the opportunity to ask questions and hold conversations with individuals at the University in ways that are not always possible in traditional school visits. Leah Strong, an Admissions Counselor argues that Marquette’s Facebook group for incoming students allows prospective students to be more open in their questions or interests in the University:

“Students are, a lot of times, just shy to ask questions in person. I visit high schools for two months every fall and people are just intimidated. You can be as friendly as possible and they’re still intimidated by you. So Facebook becomes a nice medium for those students to – even though they’ve had interactions face-to-face with counselors or current students or they went on a tour– there are those questions that they just don’t want to ask, but they will feel comfortable asking on Facebook, so that’s kind of what we’re dealing with” (personal communication, April 9, 2010).

In addition to giving students an opportunity to more openly ask questions, Marquette’s social media pages, especially the Class of 2014 Facebook group, help to provide a bridge to connect prospective or incoming students with current students.

Bridge of Information

Although printed literature and campus visits are common resources for students to use when making a college decision, being able to talk with and pose questions to current students is something of high value, as discussed among focus group participants. Current students are able to provide eager incoming hopefuls

with more honest and accurate depictions of student life on campus as they have experienced it. According to Pionek, the Class of 2014 Facebook group acts as a helpful forum in which current Marquette students are able to connect with and help answer prospective students' questions about life at Marquette:

“In essence, we know that perspective students were going online as soon as they got their acceptance letter and forming a group saying, “hey we’re the new incoming class at Marquette.” I watched that for two years and inevitable they would end up asking each other questions that none of them know the answers to, you know? So I sort of pitched the idea for a couple of years that we should start a group for them, and the idea being that we would be in a brokerage situation where we’re acting as a bridge between two people interacting – and there is value for you in doing that” (personal communication, April 9, 2010).

In order to help facilitate the student connections, Strong, the Admissions Counselor who is the primary manager of the Class of 2014 Facebook group, acts as “the middleman that connects the current student to the student that has posted a question or has concerns about Marquette” (personal communication, April 9, 2010). Having a bridge to connect current and prospective students seems to be having a positive impact on students' college searching experience. According to Cigelske:

“We’ve had more informal feedback from students about social media. We did something called the Freshman Video Project, where we gave flip cameras to seven incoming freshman to document from when they were admitted to when they came to campus. We then had them share their reflections on video with us about what worked, what didn’t work, what helped them, and what wasn’t so helpful in settling into campus life. They were very honest. It was a video diary sort of thing. Overwhelmingly, what people said helped [with their transition] the most was Facebook. It was not just because they were able to quickly get answers to questions or that they had access to Admissions Counselors, but more that what questions they had and the things that they were feeling, everyone else was feeling too” (personal communication, March 22, 2011).

Undoubtedly, one of the contributing factors that help the Marquette Class of 2014 Facebook group succeed is the strong sense of community that the group's facilitators try to foster among its members.

Community

The importance of community is magnified on social networks, as distinct groups, such as the Class of 2014 Facebook group, can serve as a trusting and supportive environment in which to establish relationships (Chayko, 2008). As a result, users are given the opportunity to easily connect with others in a way that reflects "a group of friends that are all in the same boat" (Strong, personal communication, April 9, 2010). The marketing and communication team views the general Marquette Facebook page and Class of 2014 Facebook group as a great introduction for prospective students to the Marquette community:

"One of the biggest community builders is just to know that there are other people out there like you. There is so much uncertainty when you are a teenager and getting ready to go off to college. Maybe you're leaving your state and family behind and everything, and so they maybe start to email or call their future roommate and things like that to ease the anxiety. I think social media allows that to be completely magnified. Before [Facebook] the students were stepping on campus and knowing just one or two people – maybe a few people from high school or whatever – and there's a lot of trepidation and fear. Now social media opens them up to other students before even stepping on campus" (Cigelske, personal communication, March 22, 2011).

For the marketing and communication team, the Marquette Class of 2014 Facebook group is not only a forum in which students are able to connect, but also an opportunity to successfully reflect the Marquette brand through which the community is united:

In everything I do [with the Facebook group], I really try to focus on the *Cura Personalis*¹. I'm just really concerned with making sure kids' questions are answered fully and that they see that someone is sincerely interested in them... That's how I approach it. There is obviously the Marquette brand through some of our videos or pictures that we have out there" (Strong, personal communication, April 9, 2010).

According to Geraghty, perhaps the Marquette University brand is more inclined to succeed in social media communication because a sense of community is an embedded component of marketing messages:

"I think there are two elements to what's really special about Marquette and I can always communicate them easily because it's always embodied in two phrases that we use a lot. One is, "Marquette University. Be the difference." The other is, "We are Marquette." And, I think social media is a platform for both of them, just because of who Marquette is. The "We are Marquette" part is one of the really special things about the Marquette experience because it has this sense of community and belonging that people have, not just when they're here, but you see it in alums when 30 years later they're talking about what their first day at Marquette was, or giving advice to students moving into McCormick Hall, or reflecting on the Journalism program, or all of those examples. So, um, social media was almost built for a place that sees having a sense of community as its real strengths" (personal communication, September 16, 2010).

Additionally, Geraghty views the phrase "be the difference" as a challenge to be a game changer and a major player in any industry or avenue. Another way that social media naturally fits with the Marquette brand is that it embodies "people trying new things and putting themselves out there in different ways... that really fits what Marquette is about also" (Geraghty, personal communication, September 16, 2010).

To sum up how important the idea of community is within the Marquette social media strategy, Social Media Coordinator Tim Cigelske put it simply, "In whatever I do with social media, the big goal is to communicate the message that you're part of

¹ *Cura Personalis* is a Latin phrase that means, "Care for the Entire Person," emphasizing development of the whole person, working towards justice for all, and a commitment to public service. It is often incorporated into the mission of many Catholic Jesuit schools.

a large family at Marquette and social media really helps to reflect that message” (personal communication, March 22, 2011).

It is evident that Marquette University is extending a major effort and commitment to connect with key stakeholders through social media outlets. What is not yet clear is the importance of these online interactions in the minds of the target audience. In the words of Strong, Admissions Counselor at Marquette, the importance of these online interactions in prospective students’ college decisions is still unclear:

“The big question that we toss around in our office is, we don’t know if Facebook is really making the decision easier for students to choose Marquette or if they would still come to Marquette without Facebook. The kids that are really excited about Marquette are the ones active on Facebook and they would still be really excited about Marquette if there wasn’t a Facebook group... So we don’t know if we’re getting out there and reaching an untouched population and swaying their decision or if we are only catering to the kids who would come regardless... I think it’s a good resource and it is helping a great population of students... I’m just not sure if it is making a big impact on their decision to come to Marquette or not” (personal communication, April 9, 2010).

Therefore, the purpose of this thesis project is to better understand how incoming university students, one of the institution’s key stakeholder groups, utilize social media to communicate with an academic institution and ultimately make a college attendance decision.

Results: Focus Groups

As previously discussed, the results of the focus groups were derived from a constant comparative analysis of the focus group transcriptions. Constant comparative method “creates and compares exhaustive categories that explain the data” (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000, p. 281; Hocking, Stacks, & McDermott, 2003).

Using constant comparative method and analytic induction, the data were analyzed to identify reoccurring patterns and organize the significant points in the focus group transcripts that could potentially answer the previously stated research questions. The resulting themes are presented in the following section, including the participants' general social media use patterns and their social media use pertaining to Marquette University. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to each of the participants and used throughout all transcriptions. Therefore, the names appearing in the following results sections are fictional.

General Media Use Patterns

From the beginning of the focus group discussions, it became apparent that Marquette students are consumed with media on a daily basis. Whether they are actively or passively using media, students are always plugged in. Media were described by the students as something that is "a big part of their day" (Melissa & Noel, Group 1) and something that is "always there" (Melissa, Group 1). Specifically, Social media websites were described as "an addiction" (John & Ashley, Group 2), or something that is "instinctive" (Ashley, Group 2). One student described her use of social networking as automatic, "It's almost like autopilot – I just turn my computer on and type in Facebook without even realizing it sometimes" (Jenna, Group 2). Students described how a life without media would make them feel "anxious" (Melissa, Group 1), "uncomfortable" (Abby, Group 1), or like they would "be in a corner crying somewhere" (Noel, Group 1).

The students overwhelmingly preferred Facebook to any other social networking sites. Skype was also a popular mention among the student participants. Twitter seemed to be the least widely used social networking site among the focus group participants. Lacey (2002) cites personal identity, information, entertainment and social interaction as the four primary gratifications that media users seek. In general, the participants talked about using social networking sites for entertainment, self-promotion, networking, information gathering, group organizing, and keeping in touch with family and friends, all of which correspond with the four primary media gratifications. Specific examples will be provided for each gratification category.

Identity

According to Lacey (2002), individuals are able to learn more about themselves and their peer groups as a result of media use and representations. Many of the focus group participants talked about using social media sites, such as Facebook, as a channel for expressing their future school identities or as platform for professional self-promotion. For example, one student said, “A lot of my friends back home we’re joining the groups of the schools that they were going to; they were ‘liking’ the name of the school [on Facebook] that they were going to” (Noel, Group 1). Another student talked about refraining from joining any college groups on Facebook until she had officially decided on a school: “I would get invited to join other college pages, but I would never accept it and I only did Marquette once I knew I was coming here” (Samantha, Group 1). One student talked about how she

did not use Marquette University's social media resources for information gathering purposes, but would instead use it for group identification purposes: "Joining [groups or pages] on Facebook with Marquette – I would never really do it to get information from Marquette, I more did it so that other people knew I was going here" (Abby, Group 1).

Regarding professional development, one student gave a specific example: "I'm an aspiring artist, so I also use Facebook for that – for promoting my music and stuff" (John, Group 2). Another student gave a similar example of how an acquaintance used Facebook for the same type of self-promotion: "This girl [my friend knew] at NYU... she's an aspiring singer and she kind of used her [Facebook] page as a platform for her career – like, a lot of the pictures were kind of promotional type" (Samantha, Group 1). One student discussed using Facebook for professional networking: "Personally, I would like to do something in T.V. and broadcasting and networking is so important – because the guys who are seniors now, I'm friends with them on Facebook and... if you're ever in their town and you need a connection then they could hook you up pretty easily" (Josè, Group 2).

Information Gathering

Lacey (2002) describes information gathering as another primary reason why individuals use media. When asked about specific reasons for using online media, two of the focus group participants cited information gathering as a primary media function: "We tend to get our news via online mostly because not all of us have access to a newspaper everyday" (Ashley, Group 2). On a more personal level,

that same student gave examples of how she uses online media on a daily basis: “[I use it] to check the weather... CNN... check Facebook and emails” (Ashley, Group 2). When asked specifically about Marquette University’s social media outlets, one student responded with a similar information inspired response: “I think the Diederich College of Communication is the [Marquette account] that I pay attention to the most – just because [I get] news and sports” (Josè, Group 2).

Entertainment

In addition to personal identity and information gathering, entertainment was another common gratification that the participants talked about gaining from social media. Lacey (2002) defines entertainment gratification as the personal pleasure that an individual gets from using media. When asked about the benefits of using social media websites, many of the participants provided answers that related to entertainment. One student simply said, “for entertainment” (Melissa, Group 1), while other participants gave answers such as:

- “[I use Facebook] to argue about politics and sports” (Aiden, Group 1)
- “It’s good for gossip!” (Josè, Group 2)
- “Sometimes I have like, YouTube nights where I’m just like, looking up really weird videos and watching them all of the time” (Abby, Group 1)
- “Facebook, I guess, is just kind of something that I do when I’m bored. Like, if I don’t have anything else to do I’ll just check my Facebook” (Aiden, Group 1)

When asked about the benefits of using social media websites, a common underlying theme of the answers provided by the participants was personal pleasure and

entertainment, as illustrated in the examples provided above. The other most common theme in the participants' answers was social interaction.

Social Interaction

According to Lacey (2002), media often times keep people company or provide common topics of discussion. With online media, especially social networking communities or online communication tools such as Skype, users have the opportunity to easily connect with others (Chayko, 2008). This topic of easily accessing social interaction came up frequently in the focus group discussions. This discovery is not surprising considering that the participants of this study are new college students, many of whom are living away from home for the first time. Keeping in touch with family and friends who are now far away seemed to be important for many of the participants. One participant said, "It's nice to be able to talk to people, maybe that you're not best friends with, but that you still want to keep in touch with or have a quick question – I like the Skype video for good friends or even family members or something, to see and keep in touch with" (Jenna, Group 2). Another participant added that she also uses Skype to maintain relationships, "I use Skype a lot, especially because my boyfriend goes to a different school" (Abby, Group 1). Two other participants agreed adding, "[I use Facebook] to keep up with people, too, from high school and people from back home" (Aiden, Group 1) and "I use [Facebook] a lot more now that I'm away from home than when I was home... Now I check it like, everyday just to see what my friends are doing at college and just like, to check up on them" (Noel, Group 1). One of the participants summed up

the importance of social networking sites, especially while adjusting to his new life on campus, “Being at college 100 miles away from home... you need the social networking – it’s critical” (John, Group 2). As illustrated in the examples provided, many of the participants discussed relying on social media for social interaction and to maintain important relationships. It is possible that this type of social interaction via social media helped to ease the transition from home life to college life for some of the participants.

Marquette University and Social Media Use

When asked specifically about Marquette’s official social media sites, such as the Marquette Facebook Page, Marquette Class of 2014 Facebook Group, YouTube, and the @MarquetteU Twitter feed, students talked about getting more use out of these resources after receiving an official acceptance to Marquette University than when they were prospective students learning about the school. Prior to coming to campus, the Marquette Facebook page allowed students to preview campus life by asking current Marquette students about dorm culture or looking at candid campus photos. One participant talked about seeing Marquette’s campus for the first time through the Facebook group, “I didn’t actually see the school until I knew for a fact that I was coming here... I was using the photos that they posted on the Facebook account to look at” (Noel, Group 1). Once the students were officially accepted, identifying with Marquette’s social media outlets served as a way for students to begin building their new identity as a Marquette student. The Marquette Class of 2014 Facebook Group was overwhelmingly the most popular social media resource

for the participants and the use of this Facebook group dominated much of the focus group discussions. Connecting with Marquette on Facebook allowed some of the students to publicly announce their official college decision to their own network of online friends. For example, one student said, “[I’m a] fan of [the Facebook page] to let people know I like Marquette; I’m going here” (Samantha, Group 1). Additionally, students were able to start tapping into desired group affiliations or sub-communities of interest that might contribute to shaping their future identity as a Marquette student. One participant said, “Last year when we were making college decisions, I liked a bunch of Marquette Campus Ministry and Marquette Athletics and stuff like that on Facebook, so then that gave me information” (Jenna, Group 2). Another student agreed, adding that having the opportunity to participate in interests at Marquette before officially moving to campus helped to create a sense of identity: “When [John] joined the women’s soccer team [Facebook fan page], it’s like a little sense of community; you all like soccer like the other people [in the group]” (Josè, Group 2).

Students overwhelmingly cited the Marquette Class of 2014 Facebook group as being a helpful resource for planning their move to campus. Whether it be connecting with assigned roommates and future neighbors, or asking questions about dorm environments, students reported that being able to ask current Marquette students was convenient and “very helpful” in answering questions (Jenna, Group 2; Josè, Group 2). One participant said:

“I think it’s convenient. Like we said before, it was convenient how you could talk to people about certain situations. But sometimes their experience is way different than what yours would be so you have to take that into account too. But it’s useful to hear other reviews” (Adrienne, Group 1).

Another participant agreed with the convenience of the official Class of 2014 Facebook group as a resource, “It’s like they are reaching out to you instead of you having to go reach out to them – it’s a lot easier” (José, Group 2). Other participants expressed their appreciation for the casual atmosphere of the group, “It was a lot more casual [for questions] that you wouldn’t really want to ask an Admissions Counselor” (Jenna, Group 2). Another participant agreed, “It was entertaining because some people would ask questions that I didn’t want to ask but I still had to – so it was nice because I didn’t have to ask them” (Ashley, Group 2). Other students appreciated the opportunity to pose questions to current Marquette students rather than administrators. For example, one participant said, “I feel like the students would be more honest in their answers and they might know more about the dorms, or actually living in them, for example, than school officials” (Melissa, Group 1).

In addition to providing incoming students with the opportunity to ask admission counselors or current students questions, the official Class of 2014 Facebook group also served as a community in which incoming students could reach out to each other. One participant described how she met other incoming students in the Facebook group: “Before school started, I would go on the group just to say this is my dorm room number and this is what floor I’m on and talk to people that way; and I know once I joined the group, some people added me [as a Facebook friend” (Melissa, Group 1). There were multiple mentions of an informal survey that was created on the Class of 2014 Facebook group that was meant to help incoming students find potential roommate matches based on lifestyle. In fact, many of the

focus group participants talked about how either they personally or their friends used the Facebook group to pick a potential roommate:

- “Through [the survey] my roommate contacted me” (Josè, Group 2).
- “I know that one of the girls on my floor met her roommate on the [Marquette Facebook page]. They started talking on there and then eventually were like, do you want to be roommates?” (Melissa, Group 1).
- “A lot of people I think were trying to find roommates before [school started] because a lot of people were uncomfortable with the random thing, so they were trying to find a roommate” (Jenna, Group 2).

Although the focus group students talked about appreciating and using the Class of 2014 Facebook group as a resource prior to moving to campus, a majority of the students reported that they stopped returning to the group shortly after move-in day: “I used [the 2014 Facebook group] before coming here but I don’t use it anymore” (John, Group 2). Another student agreed, adding: “I went on [the Facebook group] more over the summer rather than now – I don’t really go on it now” (Samantha, Group 1). However, a couple of participants mentioned that they still receive campus news updates via the Marquette University social media pages: “I’m a fan of Marquette on Facebook and [belong to] different groups, so I get updates [from] that” (Melissa, Group 1). Another participant gave a specific example of how Marquette’s Facebook page still provides him with campus news updates: “I found out the announcement of the new [Marquette University] President nonchalantly on my [Facebook] news feed” (Josè, Group 2). That same participant added that also uses the specialized social media accounts within his college: “The Diederich College of Communications is the one that I kind of pay attention to the most – just because of news and sports” (Josè, Group 2). However, a textual analysis

of the Class of 2014 group indicates that some students still use the Class of 2014 Facebook group as a forum and resource as conversation topics on the discussion wall have seemed shifted along with new students' path to campus assimilation. Results of the textual analysis are discussed in greater detail in a later section.

When asked to reflect on the overall importance of Marquette's social media presence, there was a common theme among the participants' answers: it is expected, helpful and convenient, but it does not greatly impact the final school decision or change a pre-existing view of Marquette University. Although some participants thought a lack of social media presence from a university such as Marquette might encourage them to do more research on the school's technology capabilities, it would not hinder their interest or prevent them from applying to the school: "I don't think it would discount [my decision] completely, but I would definitely do some research on how technology [capable] the school is" (Jenna, Group 2). Another participant added, "I feel like it's almost become the norm... I feel like a lot of people expect schools to have Facebook pages, whether or not they use it, but just because it's something that we expect to be there... but I don't think it necessarily would have affected my choice to come here" (Samantha, Group 1). Put simply, two participants said, "It would just be weird [if Marquette did not use social media]" (John, Group 2; Adam, Group 2). Instead of trying to imagine what a social media world without Marquette would be like, two students discussed how Marquette's current social media presence helps incoming students:

- "It shows that the school is up to date... and also that they're making an effort to contact students in a more casual way and that they're comfortable with it... It's just so simple" (Sabrina, Group 2).

- “It would make a difference [if Marquette wasn’t on social media]. I don’t know if it would be negative – it would just be like, I probably wouldn’t go to soccer games as much because I wouldn’t know when or where. I guess maybe I would be less informed” (John, Group 2).

Results: Textual Analysis

The Class of 2014 Facebook group is an official forum created by Marquette University for the incoming freshman class. It provides prospective students with the opportunity to get a glimpse of campus through photos, connect with future roommates or peers, ask questions and participate in relevant discussions pertaining to life on Marquette University’s campus. The Undergraduate Admissions Office at Marquette University facilitates the Class of 2014 Facebook group. Sometimes simple questions are answered by an admissions counselor, while other times current Marquette students share what their personal experiences have been like at the University in order to answer a prospective student’s question. In addition to Marquette photos or videos posted by the group’s administrator, there were eight major themes or topics that dominated the discussions on the Class of 2014 Facebook group’s wall: administrative questions, questions about a specific college or program, attempts to seek out other students, scholarship or financial aid questions, upcoming campus events, dorm life or general housing questions, athletics and other miscellaneous questions.

Theme Examples

By far, one of the most common types of questions posted on the Class of 2014 Facebook group’s wall were administrative or general information types of

questions. For example, prospective students would ask about the status of their submitted application, potential AP credit transfers, required forms that need to be submitted, class registration information, and what their Marquette identification number is. For these types of questions were almost always answered by Leah Strong, an Admissions Counselor at Marquette, and usually within a 24-hour time frame. In one example a prospective student wrote:

“Hey everyone :) I wanted to check if you guys had received my application, ACT scores, and transcripts yet? I’m really looking forward to hearing from you guys!!!”

A response was posted directly to the student after about four hours that said:

“Your ACT scores are in, but your transcript hasn’t been scanned into the system yet. If you know it was mailed in, then I wouldn’t worry about it. I’m sure it’s just in our office waiting to be scanned.”

The Facebook group seemed to undoubtedly serve as a resource for prospective students to receive quick answers to simple questions or concerns that students who are applying to a college or university are often anxious about. This type of quick yet reassuring feedback from the school can help communicate the message that Marquette genuinely cares about prospective students, as was previously discussed in the interview results.

Another type of discussion pattern found within the Class of 2014 Facebook group were questions about a specific college or program within the University. Sometimes an admissions counselor answered these types of questions and other times they were answered by a current student, depending on how the question was asked. For example, when one prospective student asked, “Due to my later decision to attend Marquette I was unable to apply for the honors program, is it still possible

to apply for the honors program either at the end of the first semester or sophomore year?" The student received a response from an Admissions Counselor about one hour later that said:

"Absolutely! You can apply during first semester of freshman year. You'll just want to contact the Honors Program once you're on campus this fall. :)"

Another student asked a specific question about the College of Communication:

"I applied in September and am really interested in going into Communications with a major in Journalism. One of the main reasons why Marquette is my number one choice is because they offer a lot of internships, which is almost necessary to advance in the Journalism field. Does anyone here participate in a foreign language program as well?"

The prospective student received a lengthy response from a current Marquette student that read:

"My favorite part of our foreign language programs is all of the opportunities they provide. You have the totally unique chance to incorporate service learning into your studies and there are tons of study abroad opportunities. Service learning is essentially getting credit in a class for doing community service in the near-campus neighborhood. I have a friend who has done tutoring at a Spanish-speaking school in the area, for example. As far as study abroad, you'd have the option to any continent of your choice with the exception of Antarctica. Essentially, you have the opportunity to be immersed into a culture and directly apply what you learn in the classroom to the real world."

The student's answer continues on to provide links to more information and resources. The lengthy, thoughtful response in the student's answer, as well as the tone and smile symbol included in the counselor's response, help to communicate a supportive and friendly atmosphere, which reflects positively on Marquette's online community and overall brand.

Within the Facebook group, it was clear that one of the main motivations of the group members was to simply be connected with other prospective or incoming

students who were in the same situation. Especially once group members started receiving their acceptance letters from Marquette, a common type comment on the group's wall was seeking out other future Marquette students in the same region, city, or state. For example, students would say things such as, "Accepted to College of Arts and Sciences – add me [as a Facebook friend], anyone from Alabama?" In instances such as these, it is clear that the incoming students were trying to find some of their future peers in order to start building other Marquette students into their personal network on Facebook. These types of interactions that happen prior to moving to campus likely help students to feel more comfortable and confident coming to campus because they might feel like they already have friends at Marquette.

Considering that paying for an education at a private university is not a small expense for most families, it is not surprising that many of the prospective students' questions pertained to scholarships and financial aid. Examples of these types of questions include:

- "When is the scholarship test for the College of Engineering?"
- "I filled out the FAFSA this past weekend. How long until I know how much I will be getting on a need basis?"
- "My cousin told me there was a Marquette Explorers scholarship for students from out of state? He's a junior from Connecticut."
- "How do you accept the optional student-parent loan?"

Questions about scholarships and financial aid that tended to be more administrative focused we answered by admissions counselors. However, a current student answered the question about the Marquette Explorers scholarship and

provided the prospective student with links to additional information. This could be because the particular student had personal experience with the same scholarship.

Another topic that seemed to generate a lot of discussions of excitement and anxiety was future events on campus, such as campus visits, preview sessions, orientation and move-in day. Many prospective students posted questions about these campus events, while other students simply wanted to connect with other people in the group who might be attending the same summer preview session, for example. Sometimes the comments surrounding campus events had a tone of excitement and other times the comments about campus events seemed to be worrisome for some of the students in the group. For example, some prospective students would express excitement with comments like, “Who is going to preview on Monday?!” or “Had a great time at the Engineering Test on Saturday!” However, there were some comments that had hints of trepidation, such as:

“Is it bad if my parents aren’t at orientation? They booked their flights to leave on the 25th. Is there any way I could get the information for parents ahead of time to give to my parents?”

The comments that expressed some type of anxiety or uncertainty always garnered supportive responses from an admissions counselor or current student, such as:

“That’s fine. My parents weren’t there either. It’s optional and just offers them a way to adjust to ‘letting you go’ I guess you could say haha. So yes, you’ll be able to give them any information they may want or need.”

Another current Marquette student reminded the incoming student that, “orientation is really focused on you.” Both of these responses contribute to the online community experience and help to ease the concerns of nervous incoming students. As discussed in the interviews with the Office of Marketing and

Communication team, these responses are reminders to the incoming students that they are being welcomed into a new family of individuals that make up the Marquette community.

Once acceptance notifications had been sent out in January and February, there was a noticeable shift in the discussion topics to issues that are of the highest concern for newly accepted students. The most common topics that newly accepted students wanted to discuss revolved around student housing and dorm life. As discovered in the focus group discussions, the Class of 2014 Facebook group contained an informal survey designed to help prospective students find a roommate with similar living habits to their own. Many of the focus group participants talked about personally using the survey to find a roommate or knowing friends who had used the survey to find a roommate. Many prospective students also posted messages on the group's wall, listing basic demographic information and advertising the fact that they were looking for a prospective roommate. For example, incoming students would post things such as, "I'm looking for two roommates who want to live in Abbotsford," or "I'm from New York and I'm looking for a roommate and I'm a communications major." Other common housing concerns included information about curfews, co-ed floors and room dimensions.

In addition to serious college life topics, there were also lighthearted discussions about the fun things on campus, such as athletics. One prospective student posted a very specific question about Marquette athletics on the Facebook group's wall that said, "I know this is a weird question to ask and you may not know the answer, but which residence hall did Dwayne Wade stay in freshman year?" This

specific comment started a string of conversations among Leah Strong, an Admissions Counselor, and other students in the group about Dwayne Wade's visits back to campus. Aside from athletics, there were also miscellaneous questions about things such as rumored haunted buildings in the surrounding Milwaukee areas, how strictly the first year reading program is enforced, the jobs on campus that allow students the opportunity to work on homework and questions about campus technology. These types of topics generated a lot of discussion and garnered responses from both admissions counselors and current Marquette students.

Timeline

One overarching trend that was observed within the Class of 2014 Facebook group was a noticeable timeline of the discussions and how the time of year influenced the questions and concerns that prospective students posted. In the beginning of the selected timeframe, November 2009, group discussions were centered on gathering general information and asking administrative questions, such as application status and required forms. In the next time shift, when admission notifications were sent out in January and February, the group discussions were centered on announcing where students were from and which college programs they would be entering. Most students were generally interested in finding other future students in their area or in their same academic programs. After prospective students are notified about admission, the next wave of discussions focused mostly on questions about dorm life, finding a roommate and picking the right place to live. Once the incoming students had determined where

they were living and who their future roommates would be, many more specific housing questions arose, such as what to bring for the dorm rooms and when to move in. Other common questions that were posted most often around the time right before move-in day were questions about orientation or registering for classes. In early September and October, after the new students moved in and started classes, there was a drastic decline in the Facebook group's activity. The sudden inactivity in the Facebook group was explained in discussions with the focus group participants. Almost all of the focus group participants agreed that after moving into the dorms and officially starting classes, the Class of 2014 Facebook group had successfully served its purpose and the students no longer needed the Facebook group in the continuation of assimilating to college life. There was an obvious correspondence between the admission timeline and the types of questions or concerns that were discussed in the Class of 2014 Facebook group. Based on the analysis, it seemed that the Admissions Office was able to thoughtfully and effectively change the style of responses accordingly in order to best prepare prospective students for what lied ahead.

Implications and Discussion of Findings

The three pronged approach to data collection for this study yielded results from multiple perspectives of the phenomenon under study. On the University side, professionals from both the Office of Marketing and Communication and Undergraduate Admissions Office strive to seamlessly integrate social media tactics with all of the other promotional branches used in the University's marketing

strategy. Additionally, marketing team members believe that one of the reasons why incorporating social media into the University's marketing mix has been successful is because the advantages that social media channels offer, such as the ability to connect communities of people, fit naturally with the existing Marquette University brand. In order for schools to be able to successfully use social media to connect with key stakeholders, such as prospective or incoming students, the characteristics of social media must first align with what the school is already doing in terms of marketing and branding. As discussed in the review of the literature, there are still conflicting ideas within the public relations industry about which specific office should be responsible for facilitating the use of social media on behalf of a college or university. In the case of Marquette University, the collaborative partnership between the Office of Marketing and Communication and the Undergraduate Admissions Office seems to provide the right balance of being able to successfully communicate the Marquette brand, while also being able to quickly and accurately answer prospective students' questions about the admission process. When the partnership between the Office of Marketing and Communication and Undergraduate Admissions Office began in order to facilitate the official Class of 2014 Facebook group geared toward incoming students, the combined efforts of the two departments created an open and supportive online community in which the school could begin to help ease the transition for incoming students – starting from the moment they first showed interest in Marquette by joining the Facebook group. Prior to Marquette using Facebook to reach out to incoming students, efforts to help ease the transition from high school to university life might not have started until

the student actually arrived on campus for a preview visit or orientation. In addition to answering questions and providing glimpses into what university life will be like for the incoming students, the social media tactics that the Office of Marketing and Communication used to reach out to incoming students provided what could be described as a one big digital meet-and-greet for the students so that they could begin to connect with their future peers. The result of this community building is that new students, especially those who are moving far away from home to attend Marquette, are able to see some familiar faces when first arriving to campus instead of going into their new university life feeling alone.

Students who participated in the focus groups for this study agreed that the official Class of 2014 Facebook group was one of the most helpful resources that they used while preparing for their transition into college at Marquette. One of the major findings that resulted from the focus group discussions was the fact that social media did not influence their decision of where to attend college. However, once they already knew where they would be attending college, social media resources, such as the Class of 2014 Facebook group, were extremely helpful in easing their transition from home life to campus life. Another important finding from the focus groups is that many of the incoming students used Facebook to officially announce their college decision to friends by associating with the Marquette network online, thus beginning to build upon their new identities as members of the Marquette community. This opportunity for incoming students to begin building their identities as members of the Marquette community before even stepping one foot on campus is likely helping the students to build a stronger

connection to the Marquette brand than what has been previously possible. Similar to what was discussed by professionals in the Office of Marketing and Communication, the students also felt that the official Class of 2014 Facebook group gave them the ability to begin meeting other incoming students in the same position as themselves prior to moving to campus. More importantly to the students, the Class of 2014 Facebook group gave them the opportunity to begin searching for a roommate. It seems that today's students now are not as comfortable with the idea of being assigned a random roommate anymore and are therefore taking it upon themselves to find their own roommate on Facebook. Although the ability to search for a future roommate might subside the trepidation of having a nightmare of a roommate for some incoming students, there is also potential that the students who do this are limiting themselves. The informal survey that was posted on the Class of 2014 Facebook group asks students questions about lifestyle habits, such as preferred sleeping schedules, study habits and partying intentions. It is assumed that students who used this informal survey to find a roommate sought out other students who had similar answers to the survey questions. If this is the case, there is little opportunity for the students to experience living with, and potentially learning from, someone very different from themselves. As technology becomes more advanced and more readily available, the idea of accepting a randomly assigned roommate might become less common among new college students and seeking one out on social networking sites such as Facebook might become the new trend.

Another major implication from this study is how new technologies, such as social networking sites, affect expected response times from university

representatives. After conducting the textual analysis of the Class of 2014 Facebook group, it became obvious that once a prospective student asked a question on the group's wall, a response from either an admissions counselor or current Marquette student was almost immediate. The interview with one of the admission counselors at Marquette revealed that this rapid response time is one of the goals that the group administrator set, as she does not like to see a question go unanswered for more than a 24-hour time period. The current generation of students who are now applying to college have been exposed to the Internet and new technologies from birth, allowing them to intuitively use new technologies to communicate, learn and understand the world around them. Don Tapscott (2008) attributes younger generations' complete technological immersion to the fact that they have *Grown Up Digital*, as the title of Tapscott's book suggests. As a result, young people are using technology to change old institutional models, from the marketplace to education, in order to better fit their needs (Tapscott, 2008). This idea was clearly observed in how students interacted in the Class of 2014 Facebook group. Prospective students asked all types of questions at all times of the day, only to gain answers within hours, or sometimes minutes.

This observation reflects an overall shift in the marketing industry that in order to successfully connect with younger generations, responses must be timely. In terms of marketing for higher education, this idea of immediate response rates can become extremely time consuming for the professionals facilitating online groups, such as the Class of 2014 Facebook group. Therefore, schools that are considering incorporating social media into existing strategic marketing plans must

be willing to make the time commitment and devote resources necessary to smoothly facilitate the programs. As in the case of Marquette University, some schools might want to consider hiring a full-time communication professional to manage the overwhelming task.

Conclusions and Future Research

The purpose of this thesis project was to better understand how incoming university students, one of the institution's key stakeholder groups, use social media to communicate with an academic institution and ultimately make a college attendance decision. Marquette University in particular dedicates a lot of time and resources in order to create a vibrant online community that reflects all other depictions of the Marquette brand. Interviews with key marketing professionals at the school revealed that the Marquette Office of Marketing and Communication has received informal feedback from new students about how the Class of 2014 Facebook group was one of the most helpful things the school did to prepare students for their future lives at Marquette. Students who participated in the focus groups also agreed that the Class of 2014 Facebook group was extremely helpful in preparing to move to Marquette's campus. However, aside from monthly activity measurement, the resulting effects of Marquette's social media efforts have been relatively unknown. In the words of Leah Strong, an Admissions Counselor at Marquette:

“The big question that we toss around in our office is we don't know if Facebook is really making the decision easier for students to choose Marquette or if they would still come to Marquette without Facebook... I know we're helping a big number of students I'm just not sure if it is making

a big impact on their decision to come to Marquette or not” (Leah Strong, Admissions Counselor).

Based on the data collected in this study, it could easily be argued that Marquette’s social media efforts do not commonly have a big impact on students’ decisions to attend the school or not. It might be a major influence on a few students’ choices, but these are exceptions rather than the norm. Instead, the major lasting benefit for students who have had the opportunity to interact with Marquette University’s social media resources before moving to campus is an easier transition into university life and a greater chance for retention.

As reviewed in the literature, Cook and Rushton (2009) cite a rocky transition filled with feeling overwhelmed with information, unsure expectations of what university life will be like, social isolation, and low commitment to the school as the main reason for student attrition. The way in which schools can combat attrition and increase student retention rates is to provide more effective support to incoming college students during their time of transition from home life to university life. The potential benefits of using social networking sites, such as Facebook, as discovered in the research results of this study, include information gathering about programs or campus events, reassurance for concerns or anxiety, school identity development, exploring expectations of campus life by asking current students questions, and providing the opportunity for incoming students to begin building their own personal network of acquaintances. All of these mentioned benefits counteract what Cook and Rushton (2009) cite as risks for a transitional struggle into college life. In short, Marquette University’s social media use for marketing purposes is not greatly affecting prospective students’ decision to attend

the school or not, but rather, is helping to ease the transition for incoming students from home life to university life and potentially contributing to higher student retention rates in the long run.

To further address the implications and conclusions presented in this study, more research is needed that includes larger groups of student participants at multiple higher education institutions that focus on more long-term effects of social media use in the college life transition. Such research should also examine new students' transitional experiences among schools that employ school sponsored social networking groups and schools that do not integrate social media with other marketing materials targeted at incoming students. Furthermore, future research should also investigate the affects of social media use among schools and new student retention rates. Additionally, other methods should be used to collect data that assess the effectiveness of social media use in new students' transition into college life, such as a large-scale survey. Finally, it is crucial that future studies of how incoming university students use social media in the college decision and transition process provide university officials and marketing professionals with resulting tips and best practices to evolve with incoming students' needs and more effectively connect with prospective students via social networking sites.

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Appendix A

Department of Advertising and Public Relations

“Consulting social media in the college transition process: Experiential accounts of the Class of 2014”

Interview Protocol:

1. Confirm the social media sites Marquette uses (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr)
2. What is the strategy behind Marquette social media?
3. How (or is) the Marquette brand communicated through social media communication? Is it considered with each post?
4. Discuss daily logistics (main audiences, topic discussed, time spent, etc.)
5. Generational issues with new practitioners and social media
6. Why has Marquette social media use been successful? Discuss measurement.
7. Success stories
8. How are competing accounts handled within University?
9. Involvement of other relevant departments (Admissions, Alumni Association)

Appendix B

Department of Advertising and Public Relations

“Consulting social media in the college transition process: Experiential accounts of the Class of 2014”

Focus Group Protocol:

Introduction: Good evening and welcome! I want to thank you all for taking time to come here this evening. My name is Amanda Stageman, and I am a graduate student in the College of Communication. I’m currently working on my master’s thesis, so thank you again for helping me with that. Today I want to talk to you about how you, as new Marquette University students, think about, feel about, and use (or not use) Marquette’s official social media accounts. I have a few questions for you to get the discussion started, but I mostly want to hear from you. I want to hear what your thoughts and opinions are.

We will be meeting for about an hour and a half, give or take a little. We won’t be taking any breaks because I don’t want to take up too much of your time this evening. So please feel free to get up and move around, or to help yourself to pizza and refreshments. This is a casual atmosphere so please make yourself comfortable.

I am video taping our discussion today. This is just for me to use so that I don’t have scramble to write everything down and so that I don’t miss any ideas that are shared. No one else will hear or see the tape, and I will be transcribing tonight’s discussion without any of your names on them. Additionally, if I quote anyone in my thesis paper, your name will not be used, as each individual will be assigned a pseudonym. I do ask that you take turns speaking one at a time so that I can easily understand the tape when I go back and listen to it later.

Just to begin, let’s go around the table and introduce yourselves. Just give your first name, where you’re from, and what major you are in if you have decided on one yet.

1. (5 minutes) During an average day in your life, how much time do you spend on all types of media?
2. (5 minutes) Let’s start by discussing how you learn about campus news. How do you stay in the loop with what’s going on at Marquette?
3. (5 minutes) Who here uses social networking sites? What are your favorite sites to use and why? (*Probe: Do you use Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, YouTube, Flickr, etc.?*)
4. (10 minutes) What do these social networking sites mean to you? (*Possible Probe: Do you use it to seek out information, entertainment, socially to keep up with friends, to find others like you, to seek out a community, etc.?*)

5. (10 minutes) Tell me what it would be like for you to go without social networking sites. What would your life be like?
6. (10 minutes) Let's discuss your level of involvement with Marquette's social networking accounts. Are you actively engaging with these accounts (having discussions, asking questions, etc.) or do you prefer to just keep an eye on what's going on?
 - a. (Follow Up) Which accounts do you interact with the most (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr) and why?
7. (10 minutes) What was your first interaction with Marquette on a social networking site like?
8. (15 minutes) Why did you become involved with Marquette's accounts? (*i.e. what were the needs*)
 - a. (Follow Up) How did you become involved with these accounts? (*Probe: When did you find out about the accounts? Was it before coming to school here, once you were accepted, once you got to campus, etc.?*)
9. (15 minutes) What do you get out of your involvement with Marquette's social networking accounts? (*i.e. what are the gratifications*)
 - a. (Follow Up) Tell me about what you get out of these interactions that you couldn't get out of a face-to-face interaction with a Marquette representative?)
10. (15 minutes) For anyone who was following/friends with Marquette's social media accounts before coming to school here, what was your experience with the accounts like prior to acceptance or moving to campus?
 - a. (Follow Up) What kind of role did Marquette's social media involvement play in your college selection process?
 - b. How was this experience similar or different from other potential schools you were considering?
 - c. Tell me about a personal story or memory that stands out in your experience with the Marquette social networking accounts.
11. Tell me what it would be like for you to go without *Marquette's* official social media accounts. What would your life be like if you couldn't follow Marquette on [MOST POPULAR SITE THAT THE PARTICIPANTS SUGGEST IN QUESTION 2]? Would your college decision have been different?

That was my last question. If anyone has something they didn't get a chance to say, but feel is important, please let me know at this time.

Let me take a minute to tell you about my research. As I'm sure you may have guessed, I'm interested in how new (Freshman) students are using Marquette's social media activities in their newly developing college experience. I want to learn about how common it is for Freshman to be involved with Marquette's social media efforts and, if you are involved, I'm interested in understanding why you are and what you get out of it. I'm especially interested in learning about whether or not Marquette's social media efforts impacted your decision to come to school here or not.

(IF THERE IS TIME LEFT, INVITE THE PARTICIPANTS TO ASK ANY QUESTIONS.)

If you have any follow up questions in the future, please do not hesitate to contact me. Everyone should have my contact information from setting up this meeting, but if you no longer have it please let me know and I will give it to you. Again, thank you very much for taking the time from your busy schedules to come talk with me.