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Building Authenticity in Social Media Tools to Recruit Postsecondary Students

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Abstract An increasing number of institutions utilize social media tools, including student-written blogs, on their admission websites in an effort to enhance authenticity in their recruitment marketing materials. This study offers a framework for understanding what contributes to prospective college students' perceptions of social media authenticity and how their perceptions shape expectations of the college experience. The results of the study are based on qualitative data comprising 16 in-depth interviews, 165 journal entries, and an eight-member focus group interview with college-bound students. Prospective college students perceived student-written blogs to be authentic when student bloggers disclosed personal details and feelings about campus life, even when the topic of the blog was contrived to focus on admission and college-related activities. Recognizing a blog as authentic occurred through the process of internalizing the experience described in the blog post and identifying with the blogger.

Keywords Social media · Recruitment · Higher education · Blogs · Marketing

Engaging students during the college search process is a chief concern for postsecondary institutions. The extent to which institutions successfully market to and recruit prospective students has major implications for college enrollments, budgets, and institutional livelihood (Kuzma and Wright 2013). In today's world technology has fundamentally changed the ways postsecondary institutions interact and communicate with students (Finnegan et al. 2007), and one of the first ways in which prospective college students interact with postsecondary institutions is through social media. From Facebook to institutional blogs, postsecondary

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admissions offices utilize social media tools to market the institution, engage with the community, and recruit prospective college students (Barnes & Mattson 2009; Constantinides and Zinck Stagno 2012). In a recent survey of college-bound high school students, 44 % reported using social networking sites to gather impressions and information about colleges, more than double the number reported in a survey just four years ago (Arts and Sciences Group, LLC 2013). How social media platforms and activities are designed and implemented can make a difference in how college-bound students experience institutions of higher education online.

However, though new innovations in social media are rapidly adopted in higher education, the effects of technology on postsecondary access are largely unexamined (Finnegan et al. 2007). Research has considered how students are impacted by reading authentic blogs during their college search (Sandlin 2013), yet institutions are lacking research-based guidance on how to build authenticity within their blog programs. Meanwhile, “colleges and universities continue to embrace social media as their adoption of blogging again outpaces both the Fortune 500 (22 % have a corporate blog) and the fast-growing Inc. 500 (42 % have a corporate blog)” (Barnes & Mattson 2010, p. 102).

Research on the use of social media as a marketing tool in the business sector demonstrates that consumers who gather information from blogs and other social media tools deepen connections, build affinity, and develop loyalty to brands (Powers et al. 2012). Postsecondary institutions seek similar results. In an attempt to arouse the interest of individuals in the college search process, postsecondary institutions are hiring enrolled college students to contribute their stories and perspectives in admission-sponsored social media outlets. By adding personal narratives and reflections from current students, the hope is that prospective students will gain insight into the everyday happenings of campus life. Innovative online social media that involve student participation can provide a more dynamic and authentic depiction of the college experience than can pamphlets, brochures, and other traditional recruitment materials.

What is perceived to be authentic in marketing materials by students in the college search process is critical because the material presented in social media outlets can shape student expectations about institutional practices, campus life, and culture (Arnett 2012; Ghosh et al. 2012). When students’ expectations are fulfilled, they positively affect the students’ social integration. Social integration fosters the student’s institutional commitment, and institutional commitment positively affects persistence (Braxton 2001). The implications are important: expectations can shape students’ college choices, and their fulfillment can impact students’ decisions to remain enrolled (Braxton 2001; Braxton et al. 1995; Helland et al. 2001).

Because of the importance of these matters, the purpose of our study was to explore the perceived authenticity of student-written blogs, an increasingly used institutional marketing and recruitment tool.

The Issue of Authenticity and the Study

Braxton argued that marketing and recruitment media should “accurately portray the characteristics of a college or university to prospective students” (Braxton 2001, p. 61). Empirical studies have concluded that it is essential for institutions to depict accurate campus conditions due to “the importance of the fulfillment of social expectations in the college student departure process” (Helland et al. 2001, pp. 392-393). Researchers also advocate “using recruitment practices that support the fulfillment of students’ academic and social expectations of the college” (Ziskin et al. 2009, p. 1).

Blogs, also known as web logs, are personal journals posted on the web and available for public view, with entries posted in reverse chronological order (Blood 2000). Over the last

4 years, recruitment-related blog use by colleges and universities has increased by 33 %. A longitudinal study conducted by the Center for Marketing Research at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth (Barnes and Lescault 2011) reported that 66 % of 4-year accredited colleges and universities have an admission blog. Of institutions with recruitment-related blogs, 85 % reported that their blogs were successful as a recruitment strategy; and 48 % of institutions without blogs planned to add them.

According to admission professionals, the reason for increased blog adoption is the capability of reflecting authenticity to digitally native high school students (Joly 2006; Stoner and Slover-Linett 2010) and of providing a more authentic presentation of the college experience than do other marketing messages. A *Chronicle of Higher Education* article (2007) focusing on technology use in marketing and recruitment noted that features such as blogs are popular with teenagers. The author quoted a director of admissions to explain the students' attraction to blogs, "Everybody applying to college is after insider information, and they don't think they're going to get it from the college, but they do believe the students will be honest with them" (Farrell 2007, p. A36). Another admissions professional quoted in a *Journal of College Admission* article (2009) noted, "Sometimes students aren't sure if we know what we're talking about, or if we're telling the truth, but if they hear it from a student going through the experience, it sounds totally different" (Feeny 2009, p. 4). In a recent survey, students whose college search was influenced by social media said blogs and notes were among the elements that influenced them; and students with the highest SAT scores (1300+) were more likely than others to look at notes or blogs to find out what people are saying about a college or university (Arts and Sciences, LLC 2013).

If blogs present the college experience authentically as perceived by prospective students, they have the potential to contribute to more accurate student expectations and ultimately foster greater student engagement. Although other metrics are available to measure blog effectiveness in terms of readership (Joly 2011), our study focused on answering two questions:

- In what ways do college-bound high school students' perceptions of authenticity in college admission-sponsored, student-written blogs shape their conceptions about and interactions with institutions of higher education?
- What do college-bound high school students describe as enhancing authenticity in college admission-sponsored, student-written blogs?

Method

This study employed a phenomenological approach, which seeks to describe the essence of individuals' *lived experiences* (Creswell 1998; Moustakas 1994) and asserts that "the important reality is what people perceive it to be" (Kvale 1996, p. 52). A key characteristic of phenomenology is that the process draws on the cumulative experiences of a group, and the researcher explores meanings through participants' shared experiences (Trotman 2006). We selected this approach because of the value it places on consumer perceptions (Thompson et al. 1989), and the focus of the study was college-bound high school students' perceptions of authenticity. Capturing students' original words and phrases leads to a deeper understanding of how they perceive authenticity in the blogs.

Sampling and Selection

We used a purposeful sample (Patton 2002) and employed Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model for student college selection as a guide (predisposition, search, and choice). The study engaged participants who were college-bound high school juniors actively involved in a college search process and seeking admittance to a 4-year college or university. The reason the criteria specified students interested in a 4-year college is that 4-year colleges and universities have a higher rate of adoption of blogs in admission recruitment than do 2-year institutions (Barnes and Mattson 2010; Noel-Levitz 2010; Noel-Levitz 2011). High school personnel at the research site identified students who had taken an active step toward their college search process—seeking information on colleges and scholarships, attending a college night, or participating in any activity that would be an indicator that they were proactively seeking out college information. In accordance with Institutional Review Board requirements, students signed assent forms; and their parents or guardians signed consent forms before participating in the study.

In the spring of 2011, we collected data on how college-bound juniors perceived authenticity in admission-sponsored, student-written blogs in three ways: through individual interviews, student-completed journals, and a focus group. We interviewed 16 college-bound juniors as they reviewed seven admission-sponsored, student-written blogs. The blog posts described experiences with college activities and events—from getting accepted to college to dorm life to sporting events. Eleven of those 16 participants maintained journals in which they each wrote at least five entries per month over a span of 3 months and provided a total of 165 journal entries. Students emailed their completed journals to the researchers and were paid \$30 upon completion as an incentive. Eight of the 16 students interviewed also participated in a focus group. In reporting the results of the study, we assigned pseudonyms to participants in order to protect their identity.

Setting

The students were selected from a high school in California with 2,300 students and a graduation rate of 94 % (compared to a statewide graduation rate of 80 %); 61 % of students complete all courses required for admittance into the state college system. The demographic distribution of students includes 53 % White (non-Hispanic), 32 % Hispanic or Latino, 5 % Asian, and smaller percentages of American Native, Filipino, Pacific Islander and African American. English learners make up 12 % of the student body, and 22 % of the students are considered socioeconomically disadvantaged (School Accountability Report Card 2009-10).

Data Collection

Using multiple collection methods—interviews, journals, and a focus group—strengthened the study by providing more integrated data sets and additional opportunities to assess insights into the phenomenon.

Interviews We conducted and audio-recorded sixteen one-on-one interviews in the school's counseling center. We conducted these interviews in front of a computer as the students reviewed seven different admission-sponsored, student-written blogs. Participants answered questions to provide insight into how they experienced authenticity within the blogs. The approach is consistent with a postmodern approach that “forgoes the search for true fixed meanings and emphasizes descriptive nuanced, differences and paradoxes” (Kvale 1996, p.

226). The interviews followed a semi-structured protocol, allowing the researcher to probe and gain deeper meaning, elaboration, or clarification.

Personal Journals Participants responded to open-ended prompts as they reviewed the blogs on their own as part of their search process. The journals were valuable to the study because they enabled the researchers to have access to participants' responses over time instead of just providing a one-time impression (Symon and Cassell 1998). This allowed for prolonged engagement with the subjects—a method that enhances the dependability of the findings (Creswell 1998). At the start of the study, we requested all 16 participants complete at least weekly journal entries over a 3-month period; and we provided a \$30 cash incentive upon completion. Fourteen students began journaling, and 11 completed the journals submitting 15 entries each over a 3-month period for a total of 165 entries. Only completed journals were used in the data analysis.

Focus Group The focus group consisted of eight of the 16 college-bound high school juniors who volunteered to share their perceptions during their lunch period. Collecting additional data via a focus group and placing equal value on it provided rich, descriptive data. According to Lambert and Loiselle (2008), “When performed rigorously, the integration of individual interview and focus group data is a productive strategy that leads to an enhanced description of the phenomenon’s structure and its essential characteristics” (p. 235). The focus group was held after the participants had reviewed the blogs, participated in the interviews, and completed their journals. We recorded and analyzed the focus group comments and then analyzed the transcript along with the transcripts from the interviews and the participant journals.

Data Analysis

Following Moustakas’ four-step phenomenological model (1994), we engaged in epoche, phenomenological reduction, imagination variation, and synthesis. Each phase asks the researcher to consider the data or evidence within a unique framework. Engaging in epoche allows researchers to actively refrain from judgment and to “be transparent to ourselves” (Moustakas, p. 86) in preparation for deriving new knowledge and creating a new vantage point. Next, through phenomenological reduction, we identified significant statements by paying particular attention to how the participants responded to the blogs. This was an iterative process with the transcripts being revisited multiple times. For example, when participants expressed feelings (such as anxiety or a sense of connection to the institution or blogger) we highlighted those statements as significant and re-read the transcript that preceded the statements to illuminate what prompted those feelings. We coded the statements of feelings as significant and the statements that preceded those feelings as significant. During the interviews, we also asked the participants to direct us to the area within the blog that prompted their response; and we coded the blog text they referred to as significant. Once significant statements were collected, we engaged in clustering them into themes by grouping together quotes that represented similar concepts or shared experiences (e.g. perceiving authenticity or elements of participants’ identity). We organized the data into significant statement clusters that represented participants’ shared experience and also identified outlier statements. We tracked those outlier statements back to the participants to further examine the outliers’ experiences. Upon the completion of the data gathering and analysis, the next step involved writing a textural description to describe what the participants experienced and a structural description to describe *how* they experienced the phenomenon and the context that influenced

their experience (Moustakas 1990). Taken together, the texture and structure resulted in a description of the essence of the phenomenon—in this case, the perceived authenticity of student-written blogs.

Results

The results of the study are organized in two sections that focus on the perception of blog authenticity. The first section describes participants' perceptions about the most important feature in a blog that enhanced its authenticity—personal disclosure. In phenomenology, this description is referred to as a *textural description*; it describes *what* the participants experienced. The second section documents the ways in which the students' perceptions of authenticity shaped their conceptions about and interactions with institutions of higher education. In phenomenology, this kind of narrative is referred to as a *structural description*; it describes *how* the participants experienced the phenomenon and the context that influenced their experience.

Disclosure: Enhancing Blog Authenticity

When participants perceived an institution's blog as authentic, they were more likely to select the institution as a good fit and were open to furthering a relationship with that institution, especially if it met other search criteria (e.g., preferred geographic region). Disclosure—sharing descriptive and personal experiences, stories, opinions, or beliefs—was by far the most prevalent contributor to the perception of authenticity. Participants identified blogs as authentic when bloggers told descriptive stories about personal relationships, shared beliefs or concerns similar to those of participants, and disclosed feelings—especially when they were positive in nature. This kind of disclosure was, above all, the feature that participants deemed key to authenticity even if the blog topic was contrived to reflect topics about institutional recruitment and enrollment activities on campus. Using pseudonyms, we provide specific examples of student reactions.

In her journal Courtney focused on the importance of the personal story and described how it shifted her perspective. She said she used the blog to “imagine the event [described by the blogger]” in her head.

I liked this entry because it was like I was reading a story, but a good story. The way he [the blogger] started off the entry was very attention grabbing. Also, I never really hear about admission stories. It made me realize what I will be going through in a year, when I am nervously waiting for decisions from colleges. This journal made me excited in a way, because I could feel Joshua's excitement in his blog and the way he wrote, “The next thing I remember was my mother screaming and running out of the room. My father and I looked at each other, unaware of what had just taken place. Then we saw the blue “Welcome to Eastern Ivy State [institutional name masked] screen, which faded into a congratulatory letter from the Dean of Undergraduate Admissions. . . . That was a day that I will never forget.”

Interestingly, even though the topic of Joshua's blog was purposefully centered on an admissions activity—a topic likely contrived by the institution's admissions office,—the way in which the blogger told the story and disclosed details about the event made all the difference in the extent to which Courtney perceived the blog to be authentic. Courtney further explained, “This blog seemed very authentic. The small details he provided, like the way his parents reacted when he got accepted, made it seem more realistic for me to actually imagine the event

in my head.” Other participants echoed this sentiment. Chelsea explained about one blog she deemed authentic: “It gives you a little personal story, like when she goes back home, you feel like it’s a real person and not a computer.”

In addition to descriptive writing, participants found the posts to be authentic when the blogger disclosed personal feelings. In a journal entry Mark wrote,

Although this blog is focused primarily on the schools’ activities to welcome potential students, it does in my opinion have a human like qualities [sic] to it in that she describes how she feels about certain events/things the school is doing to bring in potential students – like how she looks forward to meeting up with a potential student and finding something in common.

Mark felt a connection to this particular blog: “I think it really is her own [feelings], opening her feelings to the world and trying to get kids excited about college.”

Other students expressed their perception that disclosure of feelings was a strong measure of authenticity. For example, Helen said, “[I] Thought this blog was very genuine and heartfelt. She is sharing an experience which is very special to her and wants others to share in her excitement.” In another journal entry, Rose demonstrated the importance she places on disclosure—or what she called “the inner-him”—as a measure of authenticity. She wrote, “In any case, he delved into a more religious aspect towards the end of his blog, which tells me more about the inner-him, and thereby seems authentic.”

Just as the disclosure of personal experiences and stories enhanced participants’ perception of authenticity, bloggers who did not disclose feelings, opinions, experiences, or personal stories were perceived as not authentic. When blog posts lacked disclosure, there was a lack of evidence of internalization within the participants’ comments; and skepticism among participants was more pronounced. Nondisclosure detracted from participants’ perceptions of blog authenticity, as noted by Heidi when reading a blog she deemed not authentic. She was critical of the blogger for not getting personal. It was interesting that she then immediately viewed the blog as institutionally related, calling it “another college’s overview” and equated it with advertising. There was no evidence that Heidi internalized the blog.

This guy doesn’t get personal or anything, so it’s like reading another college’s overview about what’s going on. . . . He was just advertising it, like, check out this or check out that. He wasn’t, like, talking about what he experienced or what he likes about it. It’s just . . . more advertisement.

In the focus group, participants said they were skeptical of student bloggers who did not share opinions. They perceived blogs that lacked disclosure as more likely to be edited or censored, and they associated them with advertising. Participants also viewed blogs that lacked disclosure as more closely controlled by the institutions’ administrators. When bloggers did not disclose personal experiences, opinions, or stories, participants did not connect with the blogger or the institution while reading that blog.

Although the focus of phenomenological research is to capture the essence of participants’ common experiences, it is notable that not all participants initially verbalized the same responses to the blogs, specifically, two outliers who responded differently. One of the participants, Valerie, was an aspiring first generation college student, who was enrolled in her school’s college readiness program. Initially, her experience appeared to differ from that of other participants. When other participants criticized fact-filled blogs as not authentic, Valerie praised them. She wrote in her journal, “Smart students should tour the campus and not consider everything to be true.” However, when it came time for Valerie to identify colleges that might be a good fit for her, she selected two institutions, both of which had bloggers who

disclosed feelings and experiences. Valerie recognized one of the blogger's close relationships with friends and said of the blogger's embedded video, "it's interesting because you can see . . . them smiling." Valerie had previously identified the blogger from the second institution as most like her and her friends. She said the blogger, "explains what she's feeling . . . and everything she has to go through." Although Valerie initially described authentic blogs as informative (likely due to her college preparedness training), in the end, she, too, identified the most authentic blogs as the ones in which the bloggers disclosed feelings.

Another participant, Brandon, son of an independent college counselor, had been on numerous college tours. He was the only participant to identify strongly with a blogger who had a negative tone. Initially, Brandon's response appeared contrary to the other participants who selected positive-toned blogs as authentic. However, when Brandon explained why he identified this blog as authentic, it was that he recognized that the blogger disclosed his feelings by "bashing" the school. Brandon described himself and his friends as "cynical" and "skeptical," and said of the blog's negative tone, "It sounds like something I would say because I really feel like I would start complaining about something, like about my teacher."

Even though Valerie and Brandon's initial verbalized responses to the blogs were different from those of the other participants, upon further analysis, the way they responded to disclosure within the blogs was consistent with the other participants' overall experience.

Internalization and Authenticity

The most prevalent response among participants who identified a blog as authentic was a shift in their perspective from an external perspective (describing the blog, blogger, or institution), to an internal perspective (identifying with the blogger or institution). Within the study we referred to this process as *internalization*, and it was the most significant theme within the study.

Clark described how the bloggers helped him "actually see in your mind what to expect." He, like other participants, expected the bloggers to paint a picture of the institution's values and environment; and then they attempted to picture themselves in that landscape. Sam explained that he used the blogs to shape expectations about "what college life is like." He said, "I'm glad I read all those, because now I know a bit more about colleges than I did before, and it's not just academic-wise, it's kinda like what college life is like."

The internalization process shaped student conceptions about the institution. When experiencing a blog they perceived as authentic, participants went from recounting what they found to be authentic in the blog to recounting their personal views, self-concepts and/or preferences that they perceived to be in sync with the blogger or the institution the blogger represents. If the picture the blogger painted lacked detail or if something in the painting was at odds with the students' images of themselves or their future college experience, they were not likely to perceive the blogger as authentic. Participant internalization was most evident in two scenarios: internalizing place and internalizing identity.

Internalizing Place When internalizing place, the participants moved from being readers describing the bloggers' experiences to describing their own personal responses to the bloggers' experiences. Participants *tried on* the institutions with the help of the bloggers' descriptions while internalizing place. During the interview, Heidi's internalization process became apparent when she shifted from describing the blogger's experience to commenting on how it made her consider how she would meet people. Heidi said, "She [the blogger] also goes into . . . an example . . . an instance where she . . . met people and it makes you like, oh, I can go get involved . . . this is how I can meet people, too." Courtney described how the blog post helped her visualize the campus:

The way she described the "castle" library was very witty and real: "beautiful," "breathtaking," and "bloody brilliant" come to mind (I hope everyone got the Ron Weasley british [sic] accent joke). I definitely did catch the Ron Weasley accent joke! When I visualize the way she described the castle, "incredibly high ceilings, incredible stained-glass windows that stretch from the ceiling to the floor, and massive wooden tables with wooden chairs," I can picture the library in my mind.

When Clark commented on a blog he deemed authentic, he said:

What I really liked about hers is how it said you can change your mind here. ... But that's really nice, because I might want to change from . . . let's say history to psychology. It's really nice that you can have that option so you're not just stuck to one thing where you change your mind and you have to start completely over.

As the participants communicated their diverse reasons for identifying a blog as authentic, their common experience was the ability to use the blog to try on some aspect of the institution as described by the blogger.

Internalizing Identity When internalizing identity, the participants moved from reading and relaying information about the blogger to considering their own identity in terms of the bloggers' opinions, viewpoints, or personality traits. When perceived as authentic, blogs fostered the participants' understanding of their own identities and the way those identities related to their college choice.

During the interviews, when asked which blogger the participant found most authentic, participants slipped seamlessly from describing the blogger to describing themselves. Rose said, "I'm quite like her, I take on many more difficult classes, and my insane friends are the ones who keep me sane." Laura, both in her journal and in her interview, used the blogger's experience as a starting point to consider the type of students with whom she would like to attend college.

She went to the Philippines and took a biology class and then came home and made a class for biology cooking! How amazing! These are the kind of people I want to go to college with. People who have a desire to excel and become better!

In the interview, Laura also recognized a quality in the blogger that she liked and said it made her more attracted to the institution. She began describing the blogger as humble and then shifted her viewpoint from describing the blogger to stating her preference for humble people. Because of the humble nature of the blogger, Laura surmised that others at the school would be like the blogger; and this attracted Laura to the institution.

And her being like that, kinda a humble person, makes you think that's the kinda people who are going to be going there, for the most part. And for me, it makes me have an attraction to it because that's something that I would be interested in.

During the focus group, Chelsea described an element that is at the core of internalizing identity for the participants—seeing themselves in the blogger. She even suggested that participants "match" themselves with the personalities of the bloggers as a way to assess whether or not they might like a particular institution.

And you can see in the videos [imbedded in the blogs] their personality, and you can... kinda match it with yourself. Because if they are ... an outgoing person like you, and they are saying something is so great, then you can kinda be like, okay, then I would like it, too.

Using the lens of the authentic blogger to solidify their identities is not a practice the participants limited to college-related concerns, such as achieving or excelling academically. In her journal, Rose related to the blogger's warm feelings toward her grandma: "Her shout out to her grandma also brings me joy, me being one close to my grandma as well!" In his journal, Mark considered his commitment to the environment. He wrote, "I thought this blog was interesting, me being an eco-person (not hardcore, but moderately eco-friendly), so I am glad to see colleges taking the initiative and start protecting our planet."

Authentic blogs have the ability to shift the participants' foci from simply reading the blog to a more purposeful consideration of the blog, comparing their own preferences and aspirations to the expectations they had formed from the blog. As Clark described it, the authentic blogs prompted the internalization process and helped students "see in their mind" images of college from which they shaped their expectations.

Of the 16 students who participated in the study, 14 selected an institution they would consider a "good fit for them" after reading the student-written blog on the institution's website (two abstained, saying they would require more information). Of those 14 students, 13 of the 14 students selected a college or university for which they perceived the blog as most authentic or the blogger as most like them or their friends. Authentic blogs swayed participants to broaden their choices or expand their college search process, as was illustrated by Helen's comment. Early in the interview, Helen said, "I want to go to a big school. I want a big experience." After reviewing one of the blogs she deemed most authentic, she said:

One school that kinda excited me was Prairieville Christian [She mispronounced the name]. I thought, hmm, maybe I can look there when I go to Texas because it sounds interesting. It sounds fun. It's a smaller school, which isn't what I wanted initially, but they make it sound really good.

Discussion

The utilization of social media platforms for marketing and recruitment of college students in postsecondary institutions is becoming a standard practice. The perceived authenticity of social media can affect prospective students' reactions, interactions, and engagement with institutions of higher education. In this study, perceived authenticity led the college-bound students to form a connection with the institution, making them more likely to want to explore the institution further. Thus, the authenticity of social media materials used for prospective students is very important for postsecondary institutions and their admissions offices.

The results of this study suggest that the blogger's personal disclosure is at the heart of the perception of authenticity in social media marketing and recruitment materials. The way in which college students present their narratives and stories on the social media platform allows college-bound students to look for ways to identify with college students. Even if the social media topic appears to be contrived by admissions offices, when college students disclose personal feelings and details about college life, prospective students perceive it to be authentic. Likewise, previous marketing studies indicate that consumers have been unable to identify fake claims of authenticity (Beverland et al. 2008).

The process of developing a perception of authenticity in this study happened through internalization. *Internalization* occurs when prospective students make sense of social media material by shifting from an external perspective (describing the college student blog, blogger, or institution) to an internal perspective (identifying with the blogger or institution). As such,

identifying with college student bloggers becomes the key to internalizing the material, and thus, perceiving it to be authentic. This suggests that college-bound students need to know that if other students with whom they identify “fit in” at the institution, then they can too. Put another way, “If others who are like me can enjoy college life at this university, I can see myself there, too.” By imagining themselves in the same situation, prospective students believe that they will belong at the institution.

Peer Engagement

Developing a connection to college student peers via social media can be powerful in the impact on recruiting prospective students. Researchers have long established that students who feel a social connection to campus through peer relationships persist in postsecondary institutions (Astin 1984; Bean 1980; Braxton 2001; Pascarella and Terenzini 1980; Stage 1989; Tinto 1975). Retention strategies, like peer mentoring and social clubs, give students who are already enrolled a way to make connections with peers who have like-minded social and academic interests. During the college search process, this study shows that connecting with and identifying with college students can be instrumental in forming prospective students’ expectations and feelings of belonging. Put another way, hiring college students to participate in social media platforms can give prospective students the idea that they are connecting with college peers when the social media are perceived to be authentic.

Our findings show that identifying with peers and making perceived connections can happen before students step foot onto campus because the connection with institutional peers and the institution can be established during the college search process *prior* to enrollment. When perceived as authentic, social media materials allow prospective students to internalize the experiences of the college student bloggers and thereby feel a more intimate connection with the institution. This is consistent with Kuh’s (2001) findings that creating a culture of student success starts with the first contact a student has with an institution.

Implications for Marketing and Recruitment

Authentic recruitment materials help students shape realistic expectations and make informed decisions about college choice, and they are then more likely to persist at the college they chose (Braxton 2001; Helland et al. 2001; Ziskin et al. 2009). Thus, the strongest implication for institutions of higher education is centered on the ethical practices of designing and implementing social media tools to recruit prospective students. In today’s highly competitive higher education landscape, institutions of higher education could potentially use the research results to design social media that contrive authenticity. For example, institutions could hand-select bloggers who reflect a certain demographic group of students whom they are trying to recruit—whether that is high achievers, underrepresented students, or international students—even though those populations may not be well represented on their campuses and support systems for those students may not exist. Doing so would further confound students’ college search process. This manipulation of authenticity could give prospective students the impression that a particular institution would be a good fit for them; but once they arrive on campus, they may wonder, “Where are the others *like me*?”

While the results of this study present ideas on how to enhance the perceived authenticity of social media to recruit students, institutions have an ethical responsibility to aim to create true

representations of their campus environments. As Braxton et al. (2007) asserted, “Student recruitment constitutes one area where institutional integrity looms important given the role unfulfilled expectations for college play in student departure decisions” (p. 387). Greater authenticity—a sense that the marketing and recruitment materials accurately portray the college experience of that institution—can help prospective students shape realistic expectations. As such, college students who are hired to participate in social media recruitment tools can be guided and supported to participate using ethical, principled approaches. At the same time, college students can be supported to describe their experiences in rich detail and include personal feelings. Encouraging student bloggers to portray college life honestly and disclose personal stories about college life to increase perceived authenticity in blogs or other social media outlets could help position the institution to portray college life accurately (Braxton 2001) and support the fulfillment of students’ academic and social expectations of the college (Ziskin et al. 2009).

Future Research

The results and limitations of this study stimulate two important recommendations for future research. First, the study’s participants consisted of high school juniors in the college search process. At 16 and 17 years old, their experiences are likely influenced by the developmental stage in which they find themselves. Would re-entering college students in their late 20’s or 30’s respond to student-written blogs and other social media platforms in the same way? How important would it be for this population to identify with the college student blogger to the extent that they deem the blog as authentic? Postsecondary institutions that recruit and enroll a higher number of re-entry students will find the answer to this question helpful to informing their admissions-sponsored social media practices.

Second, a natural next step to this study is engaging in a longitudinal research project. Students’ perceptions of social media recruitment materials before and after they enroll in college could be compared. Would college-bound students who identify admissions-sponsored social media as authentic before entering college still perceive the social media as an authentic representation of college life once they are enrolled in that institution? Retrospectively, were prospective students’ perceptions of social media authenticity trustworthy given their experiences on campus as enrolled students? Equipping institutions with this kind of knowledge could bolster ethically sound marketing and recruitment practices that reliably represent campus culture and college life in social media.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated that building authenticity in social media tools can help lay the foundation for improved recruitment and retention by helping prospective students form realistic expectations and connect to their soon-to-be peers. Disclosure of personal experiences by college student bloggers prompted prospective students to internalize the information, form a connection with the blogger or institution, and be more likely to want to explore the institution further. Understanding and embracing the power of social media authenticity challenges admission professionals to use it ethically – as a way to guide students to better discern their college choice and not to mislead them with false expectations.

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