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## **Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership**

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Abilene Christian University  
School of Educational Leadership

Student Perceptions of Social Media in the Admissions Process

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Skiler Ashley Jones

January 2023

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how prospective first-time-in-college minority students from a university in the southwestern part of the United States use social media to make decisions about matriculating at a 4-year public university. Data were collected through semistructured interviews with five students and two staff members. Social media accounts of the Office of Admissions and the general university social media accounts were reviewed for content. Existing research pointed to the top factors influencing students' decision-making process when deciding where to attend college. The top reasons included cost of tuition and how connected students feel to the university. Prior research also explained that students want to see videos and experiences from current students online. The findings reveal that social media did not impact students' decision to attend the university because there was limited information posted on the social media platforms that interested students. Students wanted to hear from current students and the student experiences. Future research is needed to continue to explore how students use social media when deciding where to attend college.

*Keywords:* college choice, college admissions, social media, recruitment, higher education

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

In the United States, attending college has become the traditional norm for high school graduates (Bryan et al., 2017). Of the 3.2 million students who completed high school in 2019, 2.1 million (66%) were enrolled in college in the fall semester of 2018 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). However, college admissions across the United States have become more competitive in the admissions process, and the number of applications submitted has increased (Bastedo et al., 2018; Han, 2014). Along with the growth in applications, students have several options to continue their education after high school, including public and private nonprofit 4-year institutions, 2-year community colleges, for-profit colleges and universities, and technical and vocational schools.

The college choice process is an essential yet stressful time for high school seniors and their parents as they prepare for the next step in their future (Han, 2014). This process includes the reviewing of prospective majors, tuition costs, financial aid, and other factors to find the best-fit college (Han, 2014). According to Bryan et al. (2017), college choice models have helped high school counselors frame conversations about college aspirations and transitioning to postsecondary education. While choosing a college can be stressful, this undertaking is likely to be confusing as well for low-income students because they do not have access to the same resources as other students (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Teranishi & Briscoe, 2008).

### **Background of the Study**

In recent years, the way students learn about colleges has changed. For example, one new way that current high school students may interact with a college is on social media (Beck & Wright, 2019; Han, 2014). Using social media for recruitment is now essential for colleges and universities because it can help students see what is offered at the institution, including student

life and campus culture (Sandlin & Pena, 2014; Turner, 2017). As a result, admissions offices are utilizing social media “to market the institution, engage with the community, and recruit prospective college students” (Sandlin & Pena, 2014, p. 334). Therefore, as admissions offices create new strategies to recruit prospective students, colleges and universities should implement social media into the recruitment plan and marketing plan (Han, 2014).

College and university branding and social media have typically been used to attract prospective students, and a well-branded university attracts better students to the university (Joseph et al., 2017; Stephenson et al., 2016). Branding allows “organizations to differentiate themselves from competitors” through athletics, facilities, academics, reputation, and location (Stephenson et al., 2016, p. 490). During the search process, prospective students take time to compare the university brands they are considering by level of importance; thus, successful marketing for colleges and universities includes promoting academics, campus life, job placement, and athletics—areas that students research when choosing a college (Han, 2014). This is important because students are looking at institutional reputation, location, cost, and academic majors to decide whether to attend a college or university (Joseph et al., 2017). As a result, social media platforms can be beneficial within the college search and decision process (Rajesh & Michael, 2015).

In recent years, social media has greatly increased in popularity among prospective college students (Clark et al., 2017). As a result, engaging with students on social media is essential for colleges and universities because it may help schools stay competitive in a challenging market (Han, 2014; Sandlin & Pena, 2014). This form of online marketing recruitment creates ties to strengthen the relationships with and trust toward the university during this time when prospective students are going through the college search process (Clark et al.,

2017). According to Han (2014), colleges engage with students by using videos, showing students a view of campus, highlighting faculty and staff accomplishments, and promoting prospective students to visit the social media sites engaged with the university (Han, 2014).

According to the study site's website, the university was founded to provide the community with access to higher education after two senators began working to create an institution of higher education in the southwestern United States in the late 1900s. Starting in 2001, the university operated as a satellite campus to a university. The study site has been making an impact on the community throughout the years. In 2010, the university received its first freshman class and provided the region with what it terms a "pathway to social mobility." At the time of the study, the university was one of the fastest-growing universities in the state.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The ways colleges and universities market and recruit students are imperative to university enrollment (Sandlin & Pena, 2014). Deciding on a college is an integral part of a high school senior's life as they consider cost, financial aid, academic majors, and campus life (Han, 2014; Teranishi & Briscoe, 2008). Social media sites are becoming more popular with students across the country because students use social media sites such as Instagram and Snapchat to view campus life before attending a university (Sandlin & Pena, 2014). Since 2010, universities have used social media to market to students (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2013). Social media has become imperative in recruitment efforts. Prospective students may have difficulty connecting with the colleges and universities that do not have a social media presence. Students need to understand what is offered by the institution while they are researching universities; therefore, to reach prospective students, colleges and universities should implement social media into their recruiting efforts (Han, 2014).

Social media presence can show prospective students that the institution “understands their lifestyle and preferences” (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2013, p. 11). Insight into social media for prospective first-time-in-college (FTIC) students could allow institutions to create content that students will utilize when making their college choice. The problem to be addressed in this study is to better understand the influence of social media on the college choice process for FTIC students in the southwestern part of the United States.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how prospective FTIC minority students from a university in the southwestern part of the United States use social media to make decisions about matriculating at a 4-year public university. The study was designed to generate an understanding of students’ perceptions of social media and how these perceptions impact their college choice process, their eventual application to a college or university, and their decision to attend a particular college or university. This information is essential for admissions departments as they recruit prospective students. Understanding how social media impacts application, admission, and enrollment processes and how it affects a student’s decision to choose a college is important for admissions departments. The target population included incoming minority college freshman at a public 4-year university in the southern United States.

This study will assist in understanding the student perceptions of social media throughout the college choice process. As social media increases in popularity with prospective college students, it is becoming more critical to “understand the kinds of impact universities are having with their social media efforts” (Clark et al., 2017, p. 41). Colleges and universities are reaching students and utilizing social media in their recruitment plans (Han, 2014). Understanding the connection between a student’s choice of college and social media sites will help determine the

best way to reach prospective students. The information will allow colleges and universities to develop a more effective marketing and recruitment plan by understanding what information is beneficial to students to post on social media sites. Also, due to COVID-19, there is an increased need for additional research regarding minority students' college choice process.

### **Connections to the Research**

I am interested in this topic because of my own experiences with choosing a college. During my college choice process, I spent hours researching colleges that were a good fit for me. These factors for me included financial, academic, and social considerations. At the time, social media was not as popular as it is now. I met with my high school counselor, read through the Princeton Review books, and found websites that allowed me to learn more about the university I chose. I decided to attend a small school in Texas and major in communications with a public relations specialization. When I enrolled on campus, I wanted to share my experience with other students. Therefore, as a college student, I volunteered in the Office of Admissions as a Student Ambassador. This allowed me to meet with prospective students and share my university experience and why I chose to attend this university in particular. I had the chance to give tours to students and show them around the campus.

I decided to pursue a master's degree in higher education at a university in Texas because I wanted to help students of all backgrounds adjust to college life and find a college they would enjoy attending. After graduating with my master's degree, I began to pursue a career in admissions and recruiting to help students navigate the college process. This included helping a university improve its recruitment strategy on social media sites.

As a leader in the admissions department, I help students make the best decision for themselves. I provide information to them about the admissions process. Throughout my career, I



have assisted in developing the marketing that was used by the office to recruit prospective students. However, I have never sought out students' input to learn more about what they are looking for in university marketing when making personal decisions about attending colleges. This study will allow the admissions staff to gain insight into students' needs and create better social media posts that will attract more students to the university by generating content that is interesting and helpful to students.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1: How do prospective students use social media during their college choice processes?

RQ2: How do prospective students' perceptions of an institution's social media presence shape their decision to attend the university?

These questions were answered through a qualitative research design. This study was designed to understand minority students' perceptions of college and university social media sites during the college search process and if the sites impacted their decision to attend the college.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

**Admissions counselor.** An admissions counselor is a person who assists incoming students with the enrollment process at a university. The members of this department are assigned a territory of high schools to recruit incoming students, also referred to as admissions staff. (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2015).

**College choice.** The college choice process is the process students go through when deciding to go to college and selecting which college to attend (Han, 2014).

**First-time-in-college student (FTIC).** An FTIC is a student who is out of high school and enrolling in college for the first time (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2019).

**Hashtag.** Social media users use hashtags to create conversations and discussions. Hashtags are user created (N. Kumar et al., 2020).

**Prospective student.** A prospective student is a person who is looking to find a college that is right for them (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2013).

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study's conceptual framework utilizes the three-step college choice process described by Hossler and Gallagher (1987). This college choice process starts as early as the seventh grade, and there are several factors that go into choosing where to spend the next few years earning a college degree (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hernandez, 2015). The college choice process includes the predisposition stage, the search stage, and the choice stage, described by Hernandez (2015). The predisposition stage begins as early as the seventh grade and continues to the ninth grade. During this stage students begin to think about postsecondary plans (Nienhusser et al., 2016).

Students' plans for college are shaped by their aspirations, encouragement received by others, and information received about college (Nienhusser et al., 2016). The search stage begins during the 10th and 11th grades. Students begin to explore and gather information regarding colleges to consider applying to (Cox, 2016; Nienhusser et al., 2016). Parents are influential in this process and find the financial terms, geographic location, and academic rigor essential components of choosing a college (Joseph et al., 2017.). The final stage is the choice phase. This occurs during the student's senior year. This process includes where students enroll in college (Cox, 2016; Iloh, 2018). According to Nienhusser et al. (2016), the factors students consider

when choosing which college to attend are academics, financial aid, cost, and support from others.

### **Summary and Organization of the Remainder of the Study**

Many students plan to attend college after high school. There are many types of colleges available to students, including 2- and 4-year colleges. In recent years, the way students connect with colleges and universities has changed. Social media has become a primary way students communicate. This is also how students learn about colleges and universities. Although admissions offices implement social media in their recruitment efforts, it is crucial to understand how social media impacts a student's decision to attend a college.

This chapter has provided an overview of college choice, admissions, and social media. The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how prospective FTIC minority students from a university in the southwestern part of the United States use social media to make decisions about matriculating at a 4-year public university. The research study is designed to add to the knowledge of the college search process for FTIC students in an urban city in the southern United States. The research questions address gaps in the literature to gain insight into the social media used by admissions offices. The study's conceptual framework will be based on the three-step college choice process and its predisposition, search, and choice stages. Chapter 2 will provide more insight into the college search process and cover the background of the study.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how prospective FTIC minority students from a university in the southwestern part of the United States use social media to make decisions about matriculating at a 4-year public university. US colleges and universities are using social media in recruitment plans (Han, 2014). As social media use by prospective college students increases, it is becoming more critical to understand the impact colleges and universities are having with their social media presence (Clark et al., 2017). For instance, with social media, students can get information more quickly as well as personally directed information that is geared to the students' specific questions. Also, that information is often broadcasted out to other students who might have similar questions (Barnes & Jacobson, 2013; Kuzma & Wright, 2013).

The first section of this chapter describes the conceptual foundation utilized for the study. The next section is a review of the literature focused on the college choice process for diverse student populations, financial aid, undermatching, admissions recruitment strategies, and social media use in college admissions and college choice. In this section, I examine the process for African American and Latino students and the influence of parents, high school counselors, and peers on this population during the college choice process. It is important to understand this student demographic, as this is the population represented at the study site. The university the study site is based at is a Hispanic- and minority-serving institution, with over 80% of the student body being minority. For this reason, it is imperative to gain insight into the decision-making factors for African American and Latino students.

### **Literature Search Methods**

For the literature search, I used the Abilene Christian University (ACU), University of North Texas at Dallas (UNT Dallas), and University of North Texas (UNT) library databases and

Google Scholar. I reviewed over 100 scholarly peer-reviewed articles related to the topics of social media, admissions, college choice, and recruitment, which were screened for relevance to the study. Search terms included *college choice*, *social media* and *college admissions*, *college recruitment*, *social media in higher education marketing*, *first-time-in-college decisions*, and *college/university marketing and branding*. Articles relevant to this study were filtered within 5 years, beginning in 2014. However, several articles I found and reviewed were older than 5 years and were reviewed because they provided additional information about the college choice process.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In this study, I utilized the college choice model by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) as its conceptual framework because it is the most widely cited college choice model (Iloh, 2018). Several factors affect college choice, which impacts where students attend college following high school graduation. Research on the decision-making process began in the 1960s with Holland and Richards' research, which included reputation of the university, location, cost, advice from high school counselors and family, and social climate of the campus (Cho et al., 2008). Research evolved this into decision-making models. For example, D. Chapman's (1981) model focused on traditional-age students and explained external influences, such as family; friends and guidance counselors; university characteristics; and communication with the student, including recruitment and admissions, campus visits, and written information. According to D. Chapman (1981), socioeconomic status, cost, grades, and performance on college entrance exams impact college choice. Several models have been used to understand how students choose colleges—including the most widely cited model by Hossler and Gallagher (1987), mentioned above.

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage model of student college choice includes the predisposition stage, the search stage, and the choice stage. During the predisposition stage, students decide their college plans. In the second phase, students seek more information about the colleges and universities they are interested in. Finally, in the choice stage, students evaluate the colleges they have expressed interest in. In the college choice process, each stage has outcomes that prepare high school students to decide their college education.

The predisposition stage begins as early as junior high. This stage allows students to develop occupational and educational aspirations beyond high school. Students start seeing college as an option and an essential aspect of their professional goals (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Parental influence also plays a role during this stage. Parents have certain expectations for their children and are involved in all aspects of their lives, including school. According to Cabrera and La Nasa (2000), students and their parents begin planning for college in junior high. Students begin taking classes to prepare them for college and learn more about how to finance their college education. During this stage, teachers, high school counselors, involvement in sports and other extracurricular activities, and the high school curriculum influence their aspirations to attend college (Shaw et al., 2009).

During the search stage, students begin gathering the necessary information about their colleges (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). This stage takes place between the 10th and 12th grades. T. Chapman et al. (2018) stated during this phase, students and parents begin "collecting online information about programs, visiting campuses, and securing admissions materials from school guidance counselors" (p. 32). Students develop college preferences based on admissions requirements, financial aid options to pay for their education, campus life, and major (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Joseph et al., 2017). This stage is different among demographic groups. Low-

income students rely on information provided by their high school counselors. In contrast, students from higher incomes rely on parents, admissions representatives, and guidance counselors (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Wohn, 2013).

Finally, the college choice stage typically occurs during a student's senior year of high school. Students have identified their top choices and begin to apply to these institutions (T. Chapman et al., 2018). Students consider two aspects before enrolling: paying for college and feeling a connection to the institution. While tuition and paying for college continue to be an issue for all students, this is a more significant issue for low-income students, who are sensitive to tuition costs and enroll in less-expensive schools (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). High school performance and academic preparation are also areas students consider during this phase (Nienhuser & Oshio, 2017). Students must be admitted to the college they plan to attend. Colleges use high school grades and standardized tests to determine the student's ability. According to D. Chapman (1981), this helps shape the student's college choice because this qualifies students for college scholarships.

There are many options for students to decide where to attend college after high school. This includes 4-year public or private universities, 2-year community colleges, trade or vocational colleges, and for-profit colleges and universities. These options allow colleges and universities to use college choice models during recruiting to influence a student's decision-making process. Admissions offices can understand the target market, prospective students, and what is needed to develop effective recruitment strategies (Han, 2014). An essential aspect of the college choice process is a successful transition to access college information across all student demographics (Elliott et al., 2018).

The framework by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) was the best choice for the study because the college choice model explains how students make the decision on which college to attend. The framework shows in detail what students are reviewing throughout each phase of the college choice process. It is imperative to understand how African American and Latino students are reviewing colleges. With the increase in minority students attending college in the state, it is important to understand how social media as a recruitment strategy impacts an African American or Latino student's decision-making process. There is limited research on African American and Latino students' use of social media throughout the college choice process. This addresses the gap and contributes to the literature.

### **Rationale for Methodology**

The study is a qualitative case study. According to Yin (2014), a case study should be about a real-life phenomenon. Qualitative research allows the researcher to ask *why* questions and go in-depth into the research topic (Barnham, 2015). The reason for using a case study design is the researcher reviewed the phenomenon of college choice and the impact social media has on students attending a university in the southern United States. For this study, I collected data directly from the participants to understand their perspective on social media use during the college choice process. A qualitative approach was best for the study because I wanted to hear the opinions of the students who experienced the college search process and understand the influence of social media at the study site.

### **College Choice Process for Minority Students**

The college choice process enables students to research various availabilities in colleges and universities and pick the perceived best fit. This is important because high school students make one of the most important decisions of their lives by deciding to attend college, and they



begin searching for colleges with a vague idea of what they want in a college or university (Elliott et al., 2018; Han, 2014). According to Elliott et al. (2018), though, access to college information is not the same across all student groups, which disadvantages minority and low-income students. This disadvantage is a result of the lack of college knowledge and limited access to college information. As a result, some prior research related to college choice relies on older models that need to be updated to reflect current student populations (Iloh, 2018).

Several considerations are made that impact the college decision-making process for different student demographics. For example, some students make decisions based on financial aid. In contrast, other students' decisions are based on who they know and their family members' college experiences. Therefore, it is imperative to understand the decision-making process of each student demographic because African American and Latino students are underrepresented at 4-year colleges and universities across the country (Iloh, 2018). Between 2000 and 2019, the college enrollment rates of 18-to-24-year-olds in the United States increased from 31% to 37%, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2021). For Latino students, this increased from 22% to 36% in 2019 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). According to Rodriguez (2015), Latino students' college enrollment has increased throughout the last 20 years. In the state, the enrollment rates of high school students who graduated and entered higher education between 2000 to 2019 increased for African American students from 18% to 20% (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2020). Latinos in the state experienced an increase in college enrollment rates as well, from 13% to 16%, according to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (2020).

Many factors go into the college choice process for students. For Latino students, this includes their academic progress, family background, financial aid, and the campus's

demographic background (Gonzalez, 2011; Hernandez, 2015; Nunez & Crisp, 2012). Over the years, Latino student enrollment in college has increased (Clayton et al., 2019). However, traditional exclusionary practices, language barriers, and poverty are additional barriers that Latinos face compared to their White peers (Rodriguez, 2015), which may result in low college enrollment. High schools strive to create a college-going culture, but this is not always equitable across all schools and student demographics; students who attend low socioeconomic high schools may be less likely to attend college because they attend an environment with limited access to college information (Acevedo-Gil, 2019). Latino students are more likely to start at a community college or attend a Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) in comparison to other ethnic groups.

For African American students, there are several considerations that go into the college choice process. This includes the amount of financial aid and scholarships awarded to the student, distance from home, and the influence of the students' teachers and counselors (Cartledge et al., 2015). Additional barriers and factors to consider when deciding where to attend college include social and emotional well-being (T. Chapman et al., 2018). For example, African American students fear being isolated on campus, which is a barrier to the student's success (L. Johnson, 2013; Ray, 2013; Webb et al., 2018). According to Comeaux et al. (2020), racial diversity is important to African American students, and studies have shown that students felt discouraged when they visited campuses that lacked diversity. Since financial aid is important to both demographics, it is essential that they understand the process because of the role it plays in the decision-making process.

## **Financial Aid**

Financial aid plays a role in the decision-making process for students to attend colleges. For many families, the cost of college is the deciding factor, impacting both the search and choice phases (Hernandez, 2015; Seemiller & Grace, 2019). These economic obstacles can significantly change the students' college pathway, and they particularly affect African American and Latino students attending college (Cox, 2016; Goings & Sewell, 2019; Hernandez, 2015; Rodriguez, 2015). For example, research shows that African American and Latino students who were qualified to attend college decided not to enroll due to the high cost (Davidson et al., 2020; Nienhusser & Oshio, 2017). Additionally, African American and Latino students tend to have less knowledge of college financial aid and are more understanding of the role finances and college expenses play in their college enrollment decisions (Nienhusser & Oshio, 2017). Students and parents must be informed of the financial options available to them, as having a lack of information on financial aid discourages students from attending 4-year universities, even if accepted, for fear of not qualifying for financial aid (McCallen & Johnson, 2019; O'Conner et al., 2010).

Low-income students decide on their college journey based on the outcomes and situations in their lives (Cox, 2016). For example, many low-income African American students deal with complicated family situations and other economic challenges that make planning for college challenging (Cox, 2016). According to D. Chapman (1981), the cost impacts and influences a student's decision to attend college, and research shows that this is still the case today (Cartledge et al., 2015; Flaster, 2018; Muskens et al., 2019). College tuition has risen in the past 30 years and has created students' need to take on student loans, which has impacted the students attending college (Davidson et al., 2020; Seemiller et al., 2019). African American

students are taking out more student loans (Hanson, 2022). Loans have replaced several grants for low-income students, which causes debt. Currently, African American bachelor's degree holders have over \$50,000 in student loan debt (Hanson, 2022; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Other financial factors for families to consider when planning for college include student fees, housing, supplies, and transportation to school (Davidson et al., 2020).

The Federal Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) provides students with federal and state assistance, including grants (Davidson et al., 2020, Nienhusser & Oshio, 2017). However, some students are not aware of the financial aid process and therefore do not complete the application (Rodriguez, 2015). Although high schools help complete this application, many students do not attend the Financial Aid Nights held on campus to receive assistance (Davidson et al., 2020). However, African American and Latino students who attend a 4-year public or private institution are more likely to complete the FAFSA than their peers (Nienhusser & Oshio, 2017). When examining students who are eligible for the Pell Grant, African American and Latino students complete the FAFSA at higher rates in comparison to their peers (Nienhusser & Oshio, 2017). Students must understand all aspects of the financial aid process to avoid undermatching.

Undermatching, which is when a student attends a less selective university than their academic achievements allow, plays a role in the college choice process (Kang & Garcia Torres, 2019; Rodriguez, 2015; Tiboris, 2014). Undermatching impacts minority students because they are concerned about financial aid and select institutions that provide a larger financial aid package. In addition, low-income students are less likely to choose top institutions. (Tiboris, 2014). According to T. Chapman et al. (2018), first-generation college students are more likely to attend less-selective institutions compared to their peers with similar grades and test scores

because they do not understand the college admissions or financial aid process. Although more Latino students attend college, they are still the most underrepresented in college than their peers and undermatch at higher rates (Hernandez, 2015; Rodriguez, 2015).

### **Social Capital and Parent Influence**

Social capital is defined as the networks or relationships that allow others to learn about opportunities available to them (Elliott et al., 2018; Rodriguez, 2015). In education, social capital comes in three forms, which helps students achieve their goals and prepare for college (Elliott et al., 2018; O’Conner et al., 2010; Wohn, 2013). The first is obligations and expectations from the community (O’Conner et al., 2010). Next, community members serve as a resource for parents to learn more about college and financial options; this includes counselors (O’Connor et al., 2010). The final form is norms created by members of the community (Elliott et al., 2018; O’Conner et al., 2010). According to Wohn (2013), “Social capital speaks to the resources that can be obtained through social connections, [and] understanding the resources available to an individual requires social connections” (p. 428). This includes peers, counselors, parents, and social media connections. A student’s progress through education and the college choice process relies on the social capital of family, peers, and high school counselors (Elliott et al., 2018).

It is crucial for students to understand the college’s commitment to students’ families, both personally and financially in the college choice process (Goings & Sewell, 2019). However, parents may not be knowledgeable of the college process (John et al., 2005). Therefore, students utilize their peers and high school counselors for support. High school counselors can provide information about colleges and financial aid, which is why they are so beneficial for students (Elliott et al., 2018; Goings & Sewell, 2019). High school counselors work with students on college applications and encourage them to apply to colleges (Rodriguez, 2015). These

individuals also assist students in finding a college that is the best fit for the student (Elliott et al., 2018).

One of the strongest influences for African American students in the college choice process is their parents (T. Chapman et al., 2018). Parents want as much information as possible to assist their students through the enrollment process. To parents, campus tours and university reputation are important factors to consider when helping their child choose a college (T. Chapman et al., 2018; Lee, 2019). According to Wohn (2013), their friends' college plans can predict which institution African American students will attend. African American students are interested in attending colleges where they already know someone and are influenced by their peers in terms of college enrollment and choosing a major (Elliott et al., 2018).

Similar to African American students, Latino students are more likely to enroll in a college where they know someone, according to Rodriguez (2015). Latino students rely on their family's support and encouragement during the college search process (Hernandez, 2015). This support system helps students enroll and persist in college (Elliott et al., 2018). Other important factors when making the final decision on which college to attend is a sense of belonging from the institution, and encouragement from others when making the final decision on where to attend (Hernandez, 2015). For example, siblings share information and assist with the college decision-making process by providing their personal experiences and help give information to others (Hernandez, 2015).

It is important for colleges to understand how students choose a college across demographics. As colleges are working on their marketing and recruitment strategies across various platforms, it is imperative to have a brand that is interesting to the student and address

student concerns as they are looking for a university, including financial aid and cost, location, and programs available to study.

### **College and University Marketing**

As the demand for higher education grows, colleges and universities are searching for new ways to recruit and market to students. Higher education institutions promote themselves by communicating opportunities and highlights to both internal and external customers, which includes prospective and current students, parents, the government, and the local community (Gong & Tsai, 2016). Targeting a broad demographic of stakeholders is challenging. The competitive environment of higher education has required universities to develop a unique marketing strategy that emphasizes and showcases the student experience to meet the needs of prospective students (Chase et al., 2019; Han, 2014; Nguyen et al., 2021). The marketing strategies include social media, printed materials, and positive word of mouth. Colleges have also used billboards, ads at airports, and advertising on busses to reach the community and prospective students. When looking at the consumer behavior of higher education, colleges must take into consideration the decision-making process of applications based on the university's image and brand (Chase et al., 2019). According to Hanover Research (2014), universities must find new and innovative ways to differentiate themselves from competitor institutions. College and university branding have typically been used to attract prospective students.

### ***University Branding***

University branding historically has created awareness of the university to prospective students and their parents, donors, high school counselors, alumni, the community, and others with branded messages (Rauschnabel et al., 2016). According to Dennis et al. (2015), students form perceptions of university brands before enrolling, and these change during their time in

college and after graduation. Branding allows the university to separate itself from other colleges and universities (Rauschnabel et al., 2016; Stephenson et al., 2016). As prospective students are researching colleges, it is important for colleges to have a well-established brand because it attracts new students to the university and helps increase enrollment.

According to Han (2014), new marketing efforts over the years have been established to create and promote the university's image. Successful marketing for colleges and universities includes promoting academics, campus life, job placement, and athletics (Han, 2014). Students are using financial, geographic, and academic factors to choose a college. These are areas that students research when selecting a college. In the recruitment process, the internet is the most used source of information (Chase et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2018). Many students use the university website during the decision-making process because it is viewed as "the most up to date source of information available" (Chase et al., 2019, p. 42).

As colleges recruit new students, it is important for the university to understand, leverage, and manage a strong brand (Rauschnabel et al., 2016). According to Dennis (2016), "How universities manage the relationship with the students and how students perceive their institution's brand can have an impact on the attachment with the institution and in turn on students' intentions to engage with the university in the future" (p. 3049). Brand attachment is the strength of the brand's connection to students. This attachment can be done while in college or after graduation. The stronger the student's view of the university, the stronger the brand attachment will be (Dennis et al., 2016).

Higher education branding creates awareness and recognition of the university to multiple stakeholders, including prospective students (Rauschnabel et al., 2016). Prospective students compare university brands, and the well-known universities have a better chance of



recruiting more students to the university (Stephenson et al., 2016). Dearden et al. (2019) and Joseph et al. (2017) stated that universities brand themselves in order to improve their rankings in publications including *US News & World Report*, whose rankings include retention, admissions rates, financial resources, and graduation performance. Prospective students use these when researching and deciding on colleges. A better rank in college ranking publications leads to more students interested in the university and increases the matriculation rates (Dearden et al., 2019).

### ***Admissions Marketing Strategies***

While university marketing departments are branding and marketing the institution, college admissions offices are recruiting prospective students to the university. This is done through the work of an admissions counselor. The job of an admissions counselor is to recruit prospective students to the university, which includes traveling to high schools to give presentations and attend college fairs, having conversations with prospective students, emailing, text messaging, and calling students to recruit them to the university (Stegmeir, 2019). The admissions counselor is the first person a student meets and is their first impression of the university. According to Chase et al. (2019), “In order for a university admissions staff to be successful in effectively contacting prospective students ... research and a solid marketing plan are key” (p. 41). Information is often presented through printed materials, including flyers, admissions brochures, and direct mailings (Chase et al., 2019). Students also use social media to learn more about the colleges and universities they are interested in (Han, 2014; Lehmann, 2017). In recent years, college admissions offices started using social media to reach prospective students and their families to inform them on the university.

Colleges and universities strive to have a student-centered approach to their recruitment process (Stegmeir, 2019). During the recruitment process, colleges reach out to students through personal communication, which includes campus tours, admissions counselors visiting the high school, and interactions with current students (Chase et al., 2019). This can also be done by calling the student to assist with next steps and emailing students targeted information. The goal is to keep in communication with the student. The personal connection allows the admissions staff to build relationships with students and strengthen their connection to the university.

Databases and customer relationship management (CRM) systems have been used in admissions offices for the past 20 years. The system allows the Office of Admissions to segment materials to students based on interest in the university to make predictions on enrollment (Stegmeir, 2019). CRM systems are used to manage event attendance and email and call campaigns and can assist in determining a student's interest in the university. An admissions counselor can also use a CRM system to write information about a student that will assist in the recruitment process.

When colleges and universities market to students, it is imperative to segment the information for the demographics. According to Han (2014), "Market segmentation allows administrators to identify student groups who are more likely to enroll in their school" (p. 128). For example, admissions staff can use different segmentations to reach different demographics of students (Han, 2014). Segmentation can allow students to receive targeted information during the admissions process to recruit prospective students (Han, 2014). Using a CRM system, the admissions staff can make predictions on who will enroll and send targeted information to prospective students (Hanover Research, 2014; Stegmeir, 2019). Segmented email communication can be used to invite prospective students to campus events to drive interest.

This can also be used to connect admitted students to events created particularly for admitted students.

In the past, colleges have used brochures, letters, campus visits, and view books to recruit students (Peruta & Shields, 2018). In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the way colleges are marketing to students (Hisel & Pinion, 2020). Colleges have utilized virtual platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams to recruit students and host admissions events. Printed recruitment materials are a standard way that colleges distribute information to incoming students (Chase et al., 2019). This method is used to reach high school counselors, prospective students, and libraries. While brochures are used in admissions offices today, many colleges use social media to recruit prospective students to the university. This is done to reach students in a way that interests them and create a new way for admissions teams to engage with students. Research shows that this generation of incoming students is frequently on social media (Beck et al., 2019). Social media allows the university to market the institution, increase applications, and engage with students, staff, and alumni (Peruta & Shields, 2018). Universities have adopted their marketing and recruiting strategies to meet the needs of prospective students (Han, 2014).

### **Social Media and College Choice Process**

Colleges and universities are actively using the internet to recruit prospective students. Prospective students take time to compare the university brands they are considering by level of importance. Many prospective students use the internet to search and select colleges they are interested in (V. Kumar & Nanda, 2019). Similar to shopping at the store, parents and prospective students must navigate through different colleges and universities to find the best university for them (Stephenson et al., 2016). Social media platforms are beneficial within the college search and decision process (Rajesh & Michael, 2015).

According to V. Kumar and Nanda (2019), social media has developed into an essential influence on students' decision to apply and enroll in a university. A 2014 survey showed that 68% of students used social media to research schools, and 38% of students used this to decide on and enroll in college (V. Kumar & Nanda, 2019). According to Witzig et al. (2017), 41% of college administrators believe social media helps increase enrollment because many prospective students are on social media (Han, 2014). According to Stegmeir (2019), new technology has given people access to higher education and changed college conversation. Social media can connect prospective students, current students, and alumni to the university (Witzig et al., 2017). Adding personal reflections from current students on social media sites can further provide prospective students with an insight into life as a student (Sandlin & Pena, 2014). Social media is an excellent way to reach students and provide more information regarding programs and opportunities in a way that students can relate to and see every day (Hisel & Pinion, 2020).

The most popular social media platforms are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, YouTube, and TikTok. Facebook is often used by admissions offices to connect with parents (Sandlin & Pena, 2014). Twitter is used to connect with admissions representatives and share best practices. In contrast, Instagram and Snapchat are used to communicate with students (Turner, 2017). Social media should align with the college's brand and marketing initiatives. These platforms are used differently based on the population. Facebook features Facebook Live sessions to answer questions to prospective families (Sandlin & Pena, 2014; Turner, 2017). Instagram can be used to network, share contacts, and connect with others (Shafi & Nandakumar, 2019). According to V. Kumar and Nanda (2019), Instagram is an excellent resource for admissions offices to connect with and recruit students. YouTube features a variety of entertaining videos and is a popular way to showcase what is offered at a university (Hanover

Research, 2014; Seemiller & Grace, 2019). The newest social media platform is TikTok, which features short videos that users watch and share (Yang, 2020). According to Hisel and Pinion (2020), social media platforms can reach “hundreds of thousands of prospective students with minimal effort and cost to the program” (pp. 36–37). Colleges have begun implementing these platforms in their marketing efforts.

Generation Z (Gen Z) is the first generation where technology has been available for their entire lives. It is imperative to meet students where they are (D. Johnson & Sveen, 2020).

Research shows that 97% of students use one or more forms of social media (Beck & Wright, 2019). This form of marketing recruitment creates ties to strengthen the university’s relationship and trust (Clark et al., 2017). Students are frequently on their phones and want information about college instantly (Paterson, 2017). Pew Research Center’s 2021 study showed that YouTube is the most popular site for African American and Latinos, with about 85% of Hispanic participants and 84% of African American participants using the site. In the 2020 TargetX study, researchers surveyed over 2,000 students. The results showed that 63% of the participants had liked or followed a college or university on Instagram, 34% on YouTube, 24% on Facebook, and 21% on Twitter. Admissions offices utilize social media to recruit prospective students, engage with the community and alumni, and market the institution (Barnes & Johnson, 2013; V. Kumar & Nanda, 2019; Sandlin & Pena, 2014).

Research shows that students will use email if they believe important information will be sent there (Beck & Wright, 2019; D. Johnson & Sveen, 2020). Many students do not read their email, so this can be a challenge for colleges. Gen Z students are likely to delete emails that are not interesting to them based on the subject line or sender (Beck & Wright, 2019). It is crucial to find ways, such as video, to gain their attention. Colleges could engage with students by using

videos. This shows students a view of campus, highlights faculty and staff accomplishments, and allows prospective students visiting the social media sites to engage with the university (Beck & Wright, 2019; Han, 2014). It is essential to keep this generation engaged with pictures and videos. Adding personal reflections from current students on social media sites can provide prospective students with an insight into life as a student (Sandlin & Pena, 2014). Meeting students where they are and sending information to the students via text, social media, and applications on their phones could increase engagement and awareness of various colleges and universities (Beck & Wright, 2019).

### **Summary**

The literature search provided insight into the college choice theory. Studies show that when students choose a college, there are several factors they research, such as location and cost. However, this process is different for low-income students, and they do not always choose the college that is the best fit for them. Research shows that financial aid is imperative for these students to attend college. High school counselors, family, and friends are an important influence when attending college. Students will choose colleges where they already know someone.

This chapter identified key aspects of college and university marketing and how admissions departments recruit prospective students. Research shows that social media is popular with prospective students (Clark et al., 2017; Sandlin & Pena, 2014). This information is vital to the study because it is imperative to understand what the research shows about how students in the study demographic across the country are using social media when choosing a college. It is also essential to know how college admissions and marketing departments use social media to promote the university to prospective students. In this regard, social media sites are sources of information that students can use to learn more about the institution and the admissions process.

The review identified a gap in the literature regarding the need for additional research based on demographics to understand the college choice process for African American and Latino students and their use of social media to determine which college to attend. As the country's population evolves, there are more students from diverse backgrounds graduating from high school. Higher education administration will need to be aware of the strategies that influence minority students' decision-making process to attend colleges and universities in the future. With the recent changes in the recruitment process due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a gap in the research regarding the impact social media has on African American and Latino students during the college choice process. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology for the study, the study's population and participants, and the data collection and analysis methods.

### **Chapter 3: Research Method and Design**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how prospective FTIC minority students from a university in a southwestern part of the United States use social media to make decisions about matriculating at a 4-year public university. As social media increases in popularity with prospective college students, it is becoming more critical to “understand the kinds of impact universities are having with their social media efforts” (Clark et al., 2017, p. 41). Understanding the connection between a student’s choice of college and social media sites will help determine the best way to reach prospective students. This study was designed to understand social media’s effect on students’ decisions to attend particular colleges and universities. Colleges and universities are reaching students and utilizing social media in their recruitment plan (Han, 2014). The universities are using social media to reach students because students are active on social media (Clark et al., 2017). Students are using social media more frequently; therefore, colleges are using social media to reach this demographic.

The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1: How do prospective students use social media during their college choice processes?

RQ2: How do prospective students’ perceptions of an institution’s social media presence shape their decision to attend the university?

The chapter outlines the methodology chosen for the study. Chapter 3 also describes how data will be collected, the population and setting of the study, and how the methodology will answer the research questions. The chapter identifies the ethical issues that need to be considered and the researcher’s role in the study.



## **Research Design and Methodology**

For this study, I used a qualitative case study approach to shed light on a particular population, as recommended by Bhatta (2018). In this case study, I identified and analyzed the case of minority students at a specific university using social media when deciding where to attend college (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research focuses on the human experiences and analyzes their actions and meanings to analyze how humans naturally think (Saldaña, 2013). This type of research is used to learn more about social phenomenon and build an understanding of people's experiences (Leavy, 2017). Creswell et al. (2018) explained that in this qualitative approach, the researcher will explore a "real-life, contemporary system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases)" over a particular time period (p. 96). Data collection for a case study is in-depth and detailed and focuses on multiple forms of data, including observations, audiovisual material, interviews, and documents and reports (Creswell et al., 2018).

A case study approach was the best approach because I focused on a certain case within a particular system and collected data through virtual interviews. Using a case study allowed me the opportunity to generate an in-depth analysis on the impact social media has on the college choice process of minority students in the study area. Cases have included implementing a new process, program, or organizational change (Yin, 2014). I therefore used case study research to understand the importance of social media use when deciding to attend a university and whether the social media pages of that university impacted the decision to attend. Therefore, in this study, participants were asked interview questions related to the influence of social media on first-year students to attend a university in the southern United States. I asked students to explain how they used social media throughout their college choice process and what information was helpful that

the university provided during the college choice process. Also, I interviewed the university's admissions leadership about the use of social media throughout the recruitment process.

In addition to interviews, I used observations of the social media sites. Analyzing social media sites of the institution gave better insight into the outreach methods. The social media sites included Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube to determine the common themes and outreach trends used by the university. This will contribute to a richer understanding of the university's use of social media throughout the recruitment process.

### **Population and Study Site**

The population for this study was African American and Latino college freshmen from the southwestern United States. These students provided their perspective on the college search process and the use of social media while searching for colleges. In 2001, the study site began as a satellite campus of a university located in the southwestern United States. The university, Southwestern US College (SWUSC, pseudonym) has been making an impact on the community throughout the years. Since 2010, SWUSC has provided the region the opportunity to take the next step in a student's education, according to the university's website. Currently, the university is one of the fastest-growing universities in the state.

The study site is an urban public 4-year university in the southwestern part of the United States and has over 4,000 students enrolled. According to the university website, the study site is a Hispanic-serving institution and a minority-serving institution and predominately serves minority students in the area by providing an affordable college education to those who may not have access to higher education. According to Garcia and Okhidoi (2015), minority-serving institutions are significant because they enroll 3.5 million minority students, which is "40% of all undergraduate students of color in the U.S." (p. 345). The student demographics include 50%

Hispanic students, 30% African American, and 14% White. Currently, there are over 400 freshman students on campus. The freshman class demographics break down as 62% Hispanic, 29% African American, and 3% White, according to the university's website. The university uses Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to recruit and promote to prospective and current students. In addition, the Office of Career Development uses TikTok to reach current students.

The city is the third-largest city in the state, with 1,345,047 people. The city's population is 62% White, over one-third Latino, and about 24% African American. The city's largest school district has 49% of district graduates attend college, and about 18% of the graduates complete college. African American and White student enrollment is 52%, and Latino student college enrollment is 48%. In the city, 28% of African Americans experience poverty, and 24% of Latinos experience poverty. In addition, 49% of the economically disadvantaged students in the school district enroll in college upon high school graduation.

### **Study Sample**

For this study, I used purposeful sampling to deliberately select participants because of the qualities, knowledge, and experience they have related to the topic, in alignment with Creswell et al. (2018) and Etikan et al. (2016). The participants who were selected for the study were knowledgeable about the college choice process and social media because they had recently chosen a college. Purposeful sampling was useful because I selected members from a specialized population and identified issues for in-depth investigation, as recommended by Ishak and Baker (2014). Using purposeful sampling, participants may be recruited by working with organizations with the type of people required for the study. The students were selected to participate based on their connection to the study.

The study sample was recruited from a population of incoming minority college freshmen at the study site in the southwestern part of the United States. Students were invited to participate by sending emails directly to FTIC minority students on campus. Approximately 60 students were invited to participate in the study. All participants were invited via email, and once they confirmed their willingness, an interview date, time and location were scheduled. In total, I interviewed five students. In alignment with Malterud et al.'s (2016) statement that the sample should not be too small or too large, however, I determined the final sample number once saturation had been reached, as recommended by Dworkin (2012) and Guest et al. (2006). These student participants were recruited because of their ability to provide their perspective on the college search process and social media while searching for colleges, by virtue of their recent enrollment. The participant eligibility includes having at least one social media account, having reviewed university social media accounts during the college choice process, identifying as African American or Latino, and having graduated from high school in the area. Staff members were also invited to participate. I interviewed two staff members. I invited staff to participate based on their experience with the social media accounts and the student recruitment process.

### **Materials and Instruments**

This study was designed to qualitatively collect student experiences about the college decision process and their use of social media throughout this process. A qualitative method was chosen to hear the perspective and lived experiences of the participants. Therefore, I conducted semistructured interviews to allow the participants to share their experiences and provide a more personal response. Interviewing is one of the primary ways researchers collect data when conducting a qualitative study (Chenail, 2011). I created interview protocols to help guide the conversation with the participants, shown in Appendix A. In addition to student interviews, I

interviewed university admissions leadership to share about the social media and recruitment strategies (Appendix B). Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams.

Interview questions included how the participants used social media when deciding where to attend college and what they were looking for when using university social media pages. Questions were included to gain insight into how students made the decision of which college to attend, the resources they used to make their decision, and if college visits or other opportunities assisted with this decision-making process. The questions were open-ended to allow the participants to share their experiences of the college choice decision-making process, why they used social media throughout this process, and how it might be used to share information. The open-ended questions allowed the participants to be honest, which removed bias from the process. I conducted field tests to ensure that the research questions were being addressed.

### **Data Collection and Analysis Procedures**

I collected data via semistructured interviews with incoming first-year college students in a state in the southwestern United States. I asked the participants to provide more information about utilizing social media during the college choice process. I chose participants because the students would have finished the college decision-making process recently. I sent each student a consent form and a survey for demographic information. The interviews were 30–45 minutes in length and consisted of open-ended questions to allow the students to share their experiences. I then asked follow-up questions as needed to gain insight into the students' college selection process as impacted through social media. Interviews allowed students to share their experiences. Staff interviews allowed staff members to explain the recruitment strategies for admissions and

social media. The interview followed the interview protocol put into place. I recorded all interviews and took notes throughout the interview. Also, I analyzed the social media sites' content. I conducted the data analysis for 1 month. I reviewed both the Office of Admissions and the general SWUSC social media pages for the types of content posted, likes, follower count, and hashtags used for both accounts.

Once the interviews were completed, I transcribed the information verbatim and entered it into a processing software. I sent transcripts to the participants to review and evaluate their responses for accuracy. After the interviews were transcribed, I read through the data to become familiar with the results. During this process, I began coding the data for common themes, keywords, and phrases. Coding is necessary because the researcher will be able to identify the actions, reactions, and interactions and assist with understanding the participant's experiences (Saldaña, 2013). The data were based on student experiences, so the data must capture the student responses without researcher bias.

### **Methods for Establishing Trustworthiness**

To ensure the quality of the study, it is essential to establish trust during qualitative research. Trust is established through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004). Researchers identified ways to avoid potential issues when conducting qualitative research (Shenton, 2004). To establish trustworthiness in the study, I used these criteria:

- **Credibility.** Credibility establishes how the analysis and outcomes of the study produced and show the desired results (Saldaña, 2013). To ensure the research design was credible, I implemented a detailed plan for data collection to ensure the study's purpose was met.

Participants were encouraged to be honest throughout the interview and only involved students who were interested in participating.

- **Transferability.** Transferability refers to how the findings of a study are applicable to theory or future research (Moon et al., 2016). I provided a detailed description of the methods and findings to be applied to other contexts to ensure transferability in the study. This was done by providing observations and comments from the participants, so that the reader could understand the study and utilize the information in other situations and future studies.
- **Dependability.** Dependability means that if a study is done using the same methods and participants, the results will be similar (Moon et al., 2016). This was achieved by providing details of the study and transcribing the interviews verbatim. The data collection process documents how codes and themes will be established based on the interviews. I ensured that the problem statement, research questions, data, methodology, and research design were clear for others to understand. A narrative reflection of the data accumulated is included as well.
- **Confirmability.** Confirmability is the researcher's ability to remain objective (Shenton, 2004). I used interview protocols to guide the collection of data. I used triangulation to mitigate potential researcher bias in the study, as recommended by Leavy (2017). This is important because I work in college admissions and recruitment and have prior professional familiarity in the area of research. Also, I used an audit trail to show my step-by-step research process on data collection and analysis.

### **Researcher's Role**

As the researcher, my role was to understand how students utilize social media when choosing a college to attend and what the perceptions of social media are throughout the recruitment process. Currently, I work at an urban university in the Office of Undergraduate Admissions. Many admissions offices, including mine, utilize social media to reach students and provide information about the university. As an admissions professional, it was important that I reflect on how my position at the university might impact the study, data interpretation, and data collection. While I do not have direct oversight into the university or departments' social media efforts, I am aware of the university social media plan and recruitment strategies. I ensured that I allowed the participants to share their experiences and did not bring my own opinions into the conversation.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Throughout the study, it was imperative to ethically collect and review the data. I obtained approval for the study from Abilene Christian University's and the study site's institutional review boards (IRBs) before collecting data (see Appendix C). The participants signed a consent form before participating in the study. All participants in the study received information about the study's goal and purpose, use of the data, commitment to confidentiality, and the time requirements. I made participants aware that participation in the study was voluntary and they could skip questions if they felt any discomfort in answering a question. I changed all names of the participants to ensure anonymity. I guaranteed participants' confidentiality and stored all results in my office in a locked cabinet.



**Assumptions**

There were two assumptions for this study. The first assumption was that the participants would answer all questions honestly. To promote this, I instructed students that their responses to the questions would be confidential. This confidentiality should establish trust and allow the students to express their experiences honestly. The second assumption was that the students participating in the study utilized social media throughout the college choice decision-making process, because many colleges and universities are using social media to reach their students.

**Limitations**

There were several anticipated limitations of the study due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. For example, I anticipated recruiting students to be challenging because many students were currently in school online and may not have been available to participate. In addition, students may not have been interested in joining the study because they were not interested in participating in an interview via Zoom, which could have led to a low participant size, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Finally, the study's focus on one institution might have generated information that is not applicable at other colleges.

**Delimitations**

There were several delimitations for this study. First, the sample was restricted to FTIC students in the southwestern United States because these students would have recently gone through the college choice process. There could also have been differences between students who chose SWUSC compared to other colleges. Another delimitation was the low number of participants to be selected; while this decision allowed collecting information through in-depth conversations with participants, this may have limited generalizing the results to FTICs outside of this area of the United States.

## Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how prospective FTIC minority students from a university in the southwestern part of the United States used social media to make decisions about matriculating at a 4-year public university. This was important because it is becoming more critical to understand the impact social media has on recruitment because the sites are becoming more popular (Clark et al., 2017). Therefore, admissions offices need to understand the impacts social media have on enrollment and students' decisions to attend college.

I chose participants because they had recently decided to attend college after high school graduation. I collected data through semistructured interviews to have a more in-depth understanding of social media sites' impact. Interview questions included what students were looking for on college and university social media pages and how social media was used when deciding on a college. I work in the Office of Undergraduate Admissions, so the researcher's role included being nonbiased and establishing the participants' trust to receive honest feedback throughout the interviews.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how prospective FTIC minority students from a university in a southwestern part of the United States used social media to make decisions about matriculating at a 4-year public university. I designed the study to understand the impact social media has on students when deciding which colleges and universities to attend. I collected data through semistructured interviews of students and staff, as well as analysis of social media sites.

In the study, I sought to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do prospective students use social media during their college choice processes?

RQ2: How do prospective students' perceptions of an institution's social media presence shape their decision to attend the university?

The chapter begins with the description of the student and staff participants in the study and offers a detailed view of their college choice process. Next, I review an overview of the themes that came from the results. Included is a description of the findings about social media in the admissions process and how students use social media when deciding where to attend college.

### Participants

Participants in this study were five students and two staff members. The students' majors were business, psychology, political science, and criminal justice. Three participants identified as first-generation college students. Table 1 presents the demographic information for the participants. I assigned students pseudonyms, presented in alphabetical order.

**Table 1***Participant Descriptive Profiles*

Name	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Major	Social media sites used
Alyssa	18	Female	Hispanic	Political science	Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and Snapchat
Ana	19	Female	Hispanic/Latina	Psychology	Snapchat
Austin	19	Male	Black/African	Political science	Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok
Mary	19	Female	Hispanic and American Indian	Criminal justice	Instagram and TikTok
Sara	19	Female	Hispanic	Business analytics	TikTok and Twitter

Alyssa is an 18-year-old woman, identifies as Hispanic, and is a political science major. She is excited to get involved with groups and organizations on campus. For her, trying to decide where to attend college during the COVID-19 pandemic was challenging because she began to question if she really wanted to attend college after high school.

Ana is a 19-year-old Hispanic woman. She is a psychology major. Ana is a first-generation college student and comes from a big family. She is a scholarship recipient at SWUSC.

Austin is a 19-year-old Black man pursuing a degree in political science. He graduated high school with his associate's degree. His high school counselors encouraged him to apply for different scholarships. Austin did not want to secure student loan debt and is a scholarship recipient at SWUSC.

Mary is a 19-year-old woman majoring in criminal justice. She identifies as Hispanic and American Indian. She is the daughter of immigrants and is a first-generation college student. She is a member of the Elite program, which provides resources and support to first-generation college students at SWUSC. In the future, she plans to attend graduate school.

Sara is a 19-year-old Hispanic woman majoring in business analytics. Her goal is to be a lawyer and eventually become a politician. Her older brother influenced her college decision process and helped narrow her options. She recently found out that she is a first-generation college student. She applied to be part of the Ronald E. McNair program, which is aimed at increasing the attainment of doctoral degrees for low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented populations. This program will assist her to reach her goal of attending law school in the future.

I also interviewed two SWUSC staff members. These individuals hold positions of leadership at the university and have experience with the recruitment plan and social media strategies. I chose the staff members because of their knowledge of the university and the recruitment plan. The staff participants were actively involved in planning and executing the recruitment of new students and had both been at SWUSC for over 5 years.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

I collected data through interviews with students and staff members. I analyzed the social media accounts of the general university, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter for content. I also reviewed the admissions pages on the social media sites. I collected data from March through May 2022. I reviewed the social media sites throughout March. I conducted interviews beginning in March, with the final interviews in May. I sent interview requests to 60 students. I also reached out to several university staff members who worked directly with FTICs to find

additional students. After the outreach to all participant candidates, five agreed to be interviewed and take the demographic survey.

Following the data collection, I analyzed results through in vivo coding to find common themes. I analyzed the social media accounts by content analysis. The dominant themes that emerged from the student interviews included location, degree options, influences from family and counselors, campus community, and campus tours as reasons why students attended SWUSC. I organized the results by research question.

### **Research Question 1**

The study results are organized by research question. The first research question looked at how prospective students used social media when deciding where to attend college.

Participants offered their opinions on what and how each site was used. The staff participants shared insights into why the social media sites were not used as frequently as students would like. I also analyzed the university and admissions social media sites for types of content that were posted.

### ***Student Results***

All participants used social media. Many of them used social media to connect with family and friends and as a source of entertainment. However, the platforms students used varied. The top site was TikTok, which was used by four out of the five participants. Instagram and Twitter were tied for the second-most popular platform and were used by three out of the five participants (see Table 1). While the study university uses Facebook to promote information, none of the students in the study indicated that they used Facebook.

Since 2017, TikTok has increased in popularity across the world (Yachao et al., 2021). TikTok shows 60-second videos. Many of the student participants use TikTok. Austin uses

TikTok for “comedy and to get information” on different topics. Alyssa uses TikTok to watch and create funny videos to share with her friends. Mary uses TikTok as a source of entertainment. She shared that music and school, including potential future graduate schools, are the main categories found on her social media sites.

Instagram was the second-most popular site used by the students. Instagram allows the user to view photos and videos of their followers. Austin shared that “Instagram is more like Facebook for younger people.” The participants explained that Instagram is used to connect with friends. Alyssa shared that she uses Instagram “mainly for connections to keep up with friends since we’re all at different schools.” Mary explained that she uses Instagram as a source of entertainment. She enjoys music, so she follows artists on her page.

Twitter was also popular among the study participants and was a source of information on the news and current events. Austin states that he used Twitter as “a venting space. I type something out, getting it out of your head. Also, it’s where most of the artists connect with folks.” Alyssa and Sara use Twitter information about a variety of topics, including the news and information about SWUSC.

Snapchat is a site where users can send photos to other users. This site was one of the least popular among participants. Only one participant, Ana, used Snapchat consistently. Ana shared that she used Snapchat to stay connected to her friends from high school. They kept snap streaks going among the group. A streak, or a snap streak, is if you snapchat a person for several days in a row. She had not kept up with streaks recently because she became busier at work. Now, she uses snapchat to continue to stay connected with friends by having a group chat to communicate with and talk about college life and their professors.

Of the five participants interviewed, three used social media during their college search process. The other students did not use social media sites to research colleges. One participant used Snapchat only to communicate with friends and did not use social media sites to research colleges. Another student did not use traditional social media platforms such as TikTok or Instagram to make her decision, but she did utilize YouTube to find information about SWUSC.

For the students who used social media, SWUSC's sites did not appear to influence their decision. The students shared that the university was not active on social media, and it was challenging to find information about the university online. Sara shared,

I did not choose [SWUSC] based on social media because they don't have that big social media attention. It's kind of hard to look for on TikTok [SWUSC] or look for YouTube because they're really small and barely growing right now. So there wasn't much. Social media barely influenced my decision.

Sara also shared that when she looked up SWUSC on YouTube, she did not find a lot of videos from students about the university.

Students believed that it was better to hear from students instead of university staff and have students share their experiences. The students shared that the other universities that they were looking at were more active on social media than SWUSC. The other universities showcased students. The students represented on social media shared a day in the life. This consisted of attending class, on-campus jobs, friendships, and student organizations. Sara shared, "It's better to hear from a personal experience how [SWUSC] is, how they're learning, how their organizations are and know what is offered from students." Austin stated, "I didn't see them post anything important maybe like the deadlines, which was it. Nothing like a day in a life. Not just



the important people. We wanna see people that go there. You wanna see how it actually is.”

Mary stated,

Seeing the student’s point of view was great. I didn’t really see as many from SWUSC, but when I would Google or search on TikTok, I did see some students posting about [SWUSC] and getting to see the main perspective on the school or the things that the school has to offer. I think it was great getting it from them rather than getting the social media from the school.

The students thought that it was important to showcase the university on social media platforms including TikTok. Austin shared, “We are all on social media now. Most schools should have TikTok and have people specific social media team to recruit students.”

The students shared a variety of marketing strategies during the interviews because they believed the university should be marketed more. Mary said,

Promotion is a big thing. If I would have known about Preview Day, I definitely would have gone to get a campus tour and learn about different majors. ... It would have been really cool to attend events and learn more about the majors and such, which probably would have helped me out along the way.

Several students did not know about SWUSC before the university was presented to them. Ana shared, “I think flyers could be a thing. It would be really helpful because you’re spreading the word of [SWUSC]. I was never familiar with [SWUSC], and I’m really liking it. Everyone here is really helpful and really nice.” The students believed that there should be an increased social media presence with more students sharing about their experience at SWUSC and the university showcasing more information about their student organizations, more information about each of

their majors, and how they can help students reach their goals; hosting events throughout the community; and hosting more college and career events.

### ***Staff Results***

I interviewed two staff members. Both were involved with the recruitment of students to SWUSC and were familiar with all marketing and social media at the university. During the staff interviews, they shared current recruitment strategies the university was participating in and how the university reached students during the pandemic. The staff shared that the university is a small-to-medium-size university with about 4,000 students attending. The university is regional and recruits within a 50-mile radius of the university. They shared that many of their students are local. Recruitment strategies included information sessions for freshman and transfer students, campus tours, Preview Days, and other college fairs throughout the recruitment cycle. A staff member shared that the university serves “a population that’s low socioeconomic, low resource, high need, high first-generation, local, and diverse students.” The admissions team is on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The university overall is on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn.

Due to COVID-19, the university shifted recruitment beyond the traditional methods. The recruitment team had to think beyond traditional methods because they did not have a virtual presence. One staff member shared that they relied on student engagement to recruit students. As a small university, SWUSC’s recruitment strategy is to recruit “very hands on,” as described by the staff. The recruitment team relies on being face-to-face with students to assist them throughout the recruitment process. Staff shared, “Students just weren’t as engaged as they were when they’re face-to-face, so without that face-to-face piece, we lost a lot of the engagement and students.” However, the university did several virtual information sessions and virtual college fairs.

While the university had been on social media for years, the admissions office began using social media during the pandemic. The admissions team used the pages as a way for students to gain information about SWUSC. The Office of Undergraduate Admission's social media page was created because the staff were looking for a way to reach prospective students. The staff knew that students were using social media frequently but were looking for the best way to reach them. A staff member shared,

Social media allowed us to reach students during COVID, especially when we couldn't do that at all. It allows students access to us at their own pace, at their own time, and in their own way. It provides additional information in a short chunk rather than having someone go to the website and have to search for it. They can check our page or get an update of one of our stories and see what's going on.

The admissions team created a social media committee to create posts around particular topics. The staff shared that the admissions and university pages did not join TikTok because they were unsure if students wanted to learn about universities on that platform. Although the university and Office of Admissions both use social media, students shared that the university is not active on social media. At the time of the interviews, the goal of the page was to post information to students about admissions and give students reminders about next steps. A staff member explained,

Initially we saw it as another avenue or platform to allow us to disseminate information. So, a lot of the thing was to look at a calendar, see when students needed to get particular information based on the time and standard things like financial aid in October or the fall, applications at the beginning of the school year, Preview Days—there are already deadlines, registration—and then create content around how to do some of those things or

reach out to get help to do those things was sort of initially where we wanted to go. And we just segmented it based on the different subareas of our office.

Although the university and admissions team create topics and information about SWUSC, the accounts “do not focus on topics that are interesting to prospective students,” as shared by a student participant. A staff member shared,

There are goals attached to social media because at the end of the day we’re looking to see how many students we have, who we have. We’re looking for engagement, so we want to reach followers. We want to get new followers to our page. The goal is to create eye-catching, eye-popping, interesting content to have students follow what we’re doing.

As students returned to campus after the COVID-19 pandemic, there were plans to make changes to the Office of Admissions social media platform. Staff shared,

I think that would be my wish is just to see, what do we take it next and how do we leverage the ability at least to be back on campus to showcase some of the things that I think students may want to see or that would interest them in viewing?

These plans include creating more of a student presence, incorporating live events on social media, and creating a more focused and targeted social media plan. Although there are plans to create more of a presence on social media and involve students, a major challenge for the SWUSC admissions staff is that there is not an admissions person dedicated to social media. One staff member shared that it is “challenging when there is not a full person dedicated to it and [it] ends up being an added responsibility or project to another staff member.”

### ***Social Media Post Analysis***

I reviewed the social media accounts were reviewed throughout the month of March. I reviewed the Office of Admissions Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook pages. I also reviewed the

general university social media accounts for SWUSC. I also reviewed the accounts for the type of content that was posted, use of hashtags, and content posted to Instagram stories. The follower count stayed consistent for the general pages throughout the month of March on all platforms, with about 4,000 followers on Instagram, 3,600 followers on Twitter, 5,800 followers on Facebook, and almost 5,000 subscribers on YouTube. The admissions pages had 370 followers on Instagram, 75 followers on Twitter, and 175 followers on Facebook.

When reviewing the posts, several of the posts that are shared on the admissions page and the general SWUSC social media platforms were also shared on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. The posts on the general SWUSC social media pages included Women's History Month, updates about the university, Preview Day, and information about the University President's Town Hall meeting. Many of the posts for the general university page shared events about women's history from other offices on campus, including Student Affairs. There were several Instagram stories sharing posts about women's history events, student activities, and other events on campus from other offices during this time. The admissions office did not post frequently throughout March, and only had five posts throughout March. The admissions account shared information about events other departments posted and this was also shown on the Instagram stories throughout March. The admissions office posted about orientation and Preview Day.

Tables 2 and 3 provide an example of the in-feed posts shared by the general university Instagram account and the Office of Admissions Instagram feed. Table 2 shows the topic posted on the general university page, the total number of likes, and the hashtags that were used. The Office of Admissions Instagram account is represented in Table 3 and highlights the topics posted, the number of likes on the post, and the hashtags that were used with the post.

**Table 2***Types of Posts on Instagram—General University*

Topic	Likes	Hashtag used
President’s town hall meeting	11	0
Women’s history month post	23	0
Graduation post	127	0
Freshman Information Session	13	0
U.S. News Best Colleges statistics	89	0
Basketball player of the year	89	0
Track-and-field meet	82	0
Women’s History Month fact	2	0
eSports competition	98	0
Preview Day	34	0

**Table 3***Types of Posts on Instagram—Admissions Instagram Posts*

Topic	Likes	Hashtag used
Orientation dates	6	#SWUSC #Mascotbound
Preview Day	0	#SWUSC #Mascotbound
U.S. News Best Colleges statistics	15	#SWUSCSlogan #Mascotbound
Preview Day reminder	17	#SWUSC #Mascotbound
Women’s History Month	10	#SWUSC

Figures 1 and 2 are examples of the Office of Admissions posts on the Instagram account in-feed posts. Figures 3 and 4 show the general SWUSC in-feed Instagram posts.

**Figure 1**

*Admissions Posts*

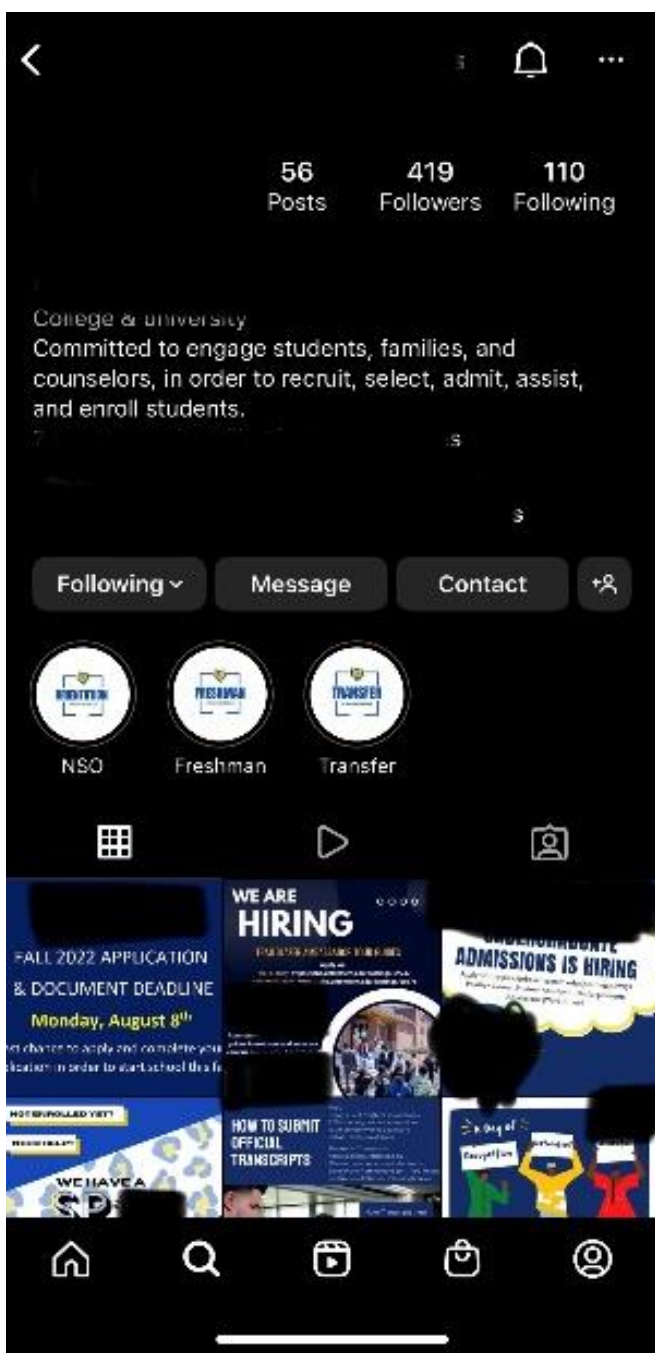


Figure 2

Admissions Posts 2





Figure 3

General University Account Posts

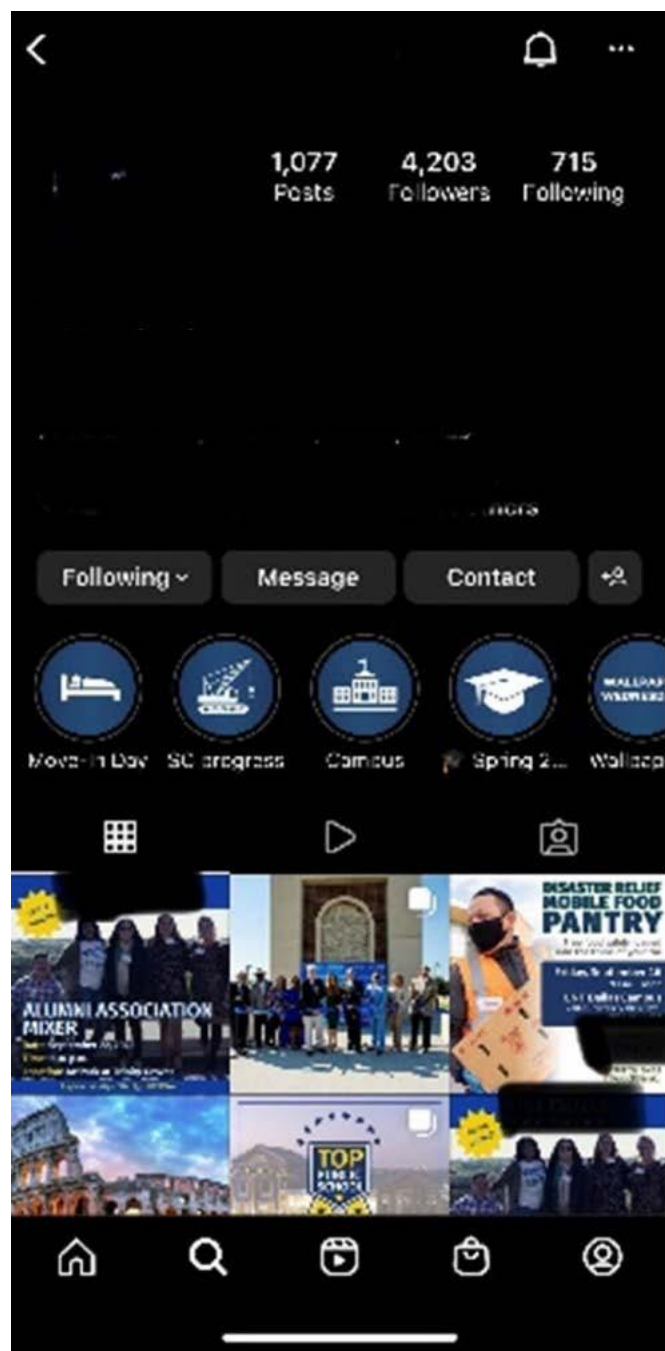


Figure 4

General University Account Posts 2



The general SWUSC social media accounts did not use hashtags on any Instagram posts throughout March. The admissions account used two hashtags, which were #SWUSC and #Mascotbound. The #SWUSC was used 45 times throughout March by the university, students, and members of the community. The admissions office used #Mascotbound twice in March. In March, the hashtag #SWUSC was used only four times.

When looking at the Twitter and Facebook pages both offices used, I saw the same posts shared across all platforms. The general page shared information about women's history events, Preview Day, and updates from the university. The admissions pages shared information about Preview Day and orientation. The only video shared on YouTube was a recorded video of the university town hall meeting. There was limited information about SWUSC on TikTok. The only office that used this platform was the Career Services office. The office posted fun videos that targeted current students. The Career Services staff posted events, cover letter and resume tips, and career advice for students.

After reviewing the university general SWUSC and admissions page, I found limited information showing student perspectives at SWUSC. Students shared that there were not stories or students sharing their experiences on social media. In March, there were not any student-focused posts. The only posts that could have been geared toward incoming students were the Preview Day posts shared by both offices. However, students did not share a day in the life or behind the scenes of the Preview Day on social media platforms. The admissions staff shared that incorporating student testimonies is something that is planned for the future but is not something that currently occurs because the admissions team was focused on getting the information directly to students as quickly as possible.

### ***Summary of Research Question 1***

Students use social media to learn about different universities. This includes student takeover or day-in-the-life posts, information on Instagram, or videos that students shared about the university. Participants shared that it was imperative to hear directly from current students attending the university. However, this did not happen in this particular study. When reviewing the social media pages, I saw the dates, deadlines, and information reflected on both the general university and the admissions pages.

### **Research Question 2**

The second research question was about prospective students' views of social media shaping their decision to attend the university. Student participants explained how they viewed SWUSC's social media pages and their influence on attending the university. They also shared other factors that influenced the decision to attend the university. The staff shared additional insight into the social media pages and why students attend the university. Finally, I analyzed the social media content for further information regarding why students attend the university.

### ***Student Results***

The students shared that there was limited information available to them online, and the social media accounts did not show the information they wanted to see. The students valued other students' opinions and enjoyed the student takeover videos on other university social media pages. These videos created interest in the students, and they wanted to see other students' opinions on campus. Students had mixed views of the university based on what they saw on social media.

Austin shared that SWUSC would post occasionally but did not post as often. When asked what he thought SWUSC would be like based on social media, he said, "I didn't know."

Sara shared that she thought SWUSC was a smaller campus based on what she saw on social media. She thought there would not be “much going on. I thought it would be like a community college.” However, now that Sara is on campus, she thinks SWUSC is a good school. She believes the professors are good. When asked her opinion of SWUSC based on social media, Mary shared,

I thought it would be small, welcoming, and very much a happy campus, and it is. It really is. I don’t know. I also expected less. I really wanted to go to another school, but I wasn’t able to. I got either rejection letters or [it was] too expensive. But SWUSC really grew on me over time.

She continued to share that the university “exceeded my expectations quite a lot. I don’t know why I expected so little of SWUSC, but I got so much more in return.”

Students shared that they followed other universities and SWUSC when deciding where to attend college. Some of the colleges they followed were in the same state or city as SWUSC but showed different aspects of the university, city, and college life. Austin shared that one of the colleges he was interested in was very active on social media and made him think, “OK, I gotta go here.” He shared that the school was posting the whole admissions season. He stated,

A few times out of the week they would have one student run the Instagram page. They will talk about their major on the first slide, tour the campus, and go through a day in the life. They would do that for the entire week and have an informational live. They would have stories on how to get in and navigate through the whole admission process.

Many of the students shared that the reason they chose SWUSC was because of the cost of the university. Austin was very concerned about paying for college and “just wanted to go to school

for free.” As he looked at colleges, he was eliminating the universities from which he did not receive scholarship money. Austin described the advice he received from his counselors:

It will probably be not having to pay. So going through the whole college system and going through college already through high school, they (the counselors) also showed me how you never want to pay for school because most of the staff was in debt still to this day and having to pay for school. They’ve always told us to apply to this scholarship, and it’s a lot of money out there.

For example, scholarship opportunities were significant in helping students decide where to attend. The financial aspect of attending college was an important factor for these students. Sara is a recipient of a scholarship available at the university, which played a part in deciding where to attend. Ana is also a scholarship recipient at SWUSC and shared the impact this had on her:

My counselor told me that SWUSC wanted to pay my school for me, and she just said it out of nowhere. And it just made me really excited that someone noticed me. I was thinking to myself if SWUSC noticed me and decided to give me an opportunity, I should really take it.

Several participants discussed how affordable the tuition is at SWUSC. Mary was planning to attend graduate school and believed that having affordable education would allow her to “save money for the future.” Alyssa found that the cost of tuition was very affordable and an essential factor when deciding to attend SWUSC. When the staff participants were asked why they believe students attend SWUSC, both stated the affordable tuition was a driving factor in student decision-making. The staff explained that the university is the most reasonably priced in the area. One team member shared in detail the cost and scholarship benefit available to students:

The price point and affordability—particularly nowadays, [the] economy and student loans and hesitation of incurring more of that. So I think looking at what we cost and the programs we offer to help with the cost really make SWUSC sort of stand out. People can say they may not be my first choice initially, but I can't really beat not having to pay this much money.

Students shared a variety of assumptions about the university based on social media.

However, students shared that social media accounts did not shape their decision to attend the university. The cost of attending SWUSC was an influential decision maker for all participants. Students discussed low tuition and scholarships available as essential factors in their decision to attend SWUSC. Scholarship programs were critical to the participants and impacted them when deciding between SWUSC and other colleges.

### ***Staff Results***

As shared in Research Question 1, the staff at SWUSC shared that the COVID-19 pandemic changed how the university reached prospective students. Before the pandemic, the university relied heavily on in-person events such as college fairs and campus visits. The admissions staff shared that the recruitment team relied on personal contact with students to assist them through the admissions process, which changed during the pandemic. A staff member shared,

It really does rely on that personal relationship and that personal contact for consistency, for follow through, for ensuring that those students do what they need to do. When you remove the ability to interact with folks and it was only through a Zoom, Teams, email, or phone call, then I think it really diminished the ability to establish that relationship

with those students. ... Seeing them on campus, talking to them, I think really impacted the ability to feel like they were getting what they needed to get to be on track.

Connecting with students was the reason the university used social media. The university still wanted to have a connection with prospective students.

The staff shared that the current strategy to recruit students through social media was to provide information to the students. This was done by sharing dates, deadlines, and reminders of upcoming information. Also, the staff shared that they posted videos on how to complete the admissions application and the next steps after students have been admitted. When asked why they believe that students attend SWUSC, one staff member shared that the university is “close to home, and it’s inexpensive.” Another staff member shared that he spoke to the orientation leaders and asked their reason they attended SWUSC. The staff member shared,

A lot of them wanted something that was small enough, so they felt like they weren’t another number and they wanted to make that connection with the faculty in their program. They felt welcomed and really like [that] they matter. ... They want to be part of something bigger. ... The price point and affordability—particularly nowadays, the economy and student loans hesitation of incurring more. I think looking at what we cost and the program that we offer, like some of the initiatives to help with the cost, really make SWUSC sort of stand out.

Both students and staff agreed that the cost of the university is a significant factor in attending SWUSC. However, when asked if this is reflected in the university’s marketing and social media, both staff believe that it is. One staff member shared, “It is reflected in social media.” The staff member went on to explain that it could be done more effectively and



showcase current students that chose the university based on the cost to have a more significant impact on prospective students.

### ***Social Media Post Analysis***

The second research question refers to how prospective students' perception of a university's social media account shapes their decision to attend the university. Students shared that social media did not influence or impact their decision to attend the university. The students shared that the reason they attended was due to the cost of the university. Throughout March, during the review of the social media accounts, there was limited information shared regarding the cost or affordability of the university.

The admissions account and the general university page shared a new U.S. News Best Colleges ranking. The university was ranked for elevating low-income students to a higher standard of living. The admissions office also shared dates and deadlines regarding scholarship partnerships. The office also shared about the scholarship deadlines coming but did not mention the cost or benefit of the programs in the caption.

Although students chose SWUSC because of the price point, there were limited posts regarding the cost throughout the month of March. Table 4 shows the admissions office's three posts regarding cost of tuition or scholarships throughout the recruitment cycle.

**Table 4***Admissions Posts Regarding Cost*

Topic	Type	Likes	Hashtags
Fall scholarship deadline on December 1	Post	8	#SWUSC #Mascotbound
Scholarship partnership dates and deadlines	Post	15	#SWUSC #UniversitySlogan #MascotBound
Elevating standard of living ranking	Post	15	#SWUSC #UniversitySlogan #MascotBound

The general university page shared only one post regarding cost throughout March, but there were two posts regarding cost and scholarships throughout the recruitment cycle. The table below shows the general university page posts discussing tuition cost or scholarships.

**Table 5***General University Posts Regarding Cost*

Topic	Type	Likes	Hashtags
Biotech and STEM scholarship	Post	15	None
Social mobility ranking	Post	91	None

Students shared that they expected less from the university based on what they saw on social media. Limited posts or stories showcased student life on both the admissions and general university pages. Students also shared that they wanted to see more student testimonials and day-in-the-life videos of current students. Austin shared that another university he was considering did this and made him want to attend the university because he was able to imagine himself at

the university. As previously mentioned, this is an area that the admissions staff would like to improve upon in the future.

### ***Summary of Research Question 2***

The second research question was about how students' perception of a university's social media account shapes their decision to attend the university. Student participants shared that this did not impact their decision to attend SWUSC as the university was not active on social media. The students shared that based on the limited posts they saw, they believed that the university would be a small campus with good professors. Some did not expect much from the university, but their opinions changed after attending SWUSC. The participants shared that the university cost was why the students attended the SWUSC. The staff shared that "the reason students attend the university was because of the location of the university and the cost of tuition." I reviewed the social media throughout March. During the social media review, limited posts discussed the cost of attendance, but both the admissions and general university pages highlighted various scholarships available.

### **Summary of Findings**

I conducted this study at a small university. The study focused on how students used social media when deciding where to attend college. I interviewed a total of five student participants and two student participants via Microsoft Teams between March and June. I reviewed the university admissions social media account and the general university page throughout March. Students shared their use of social media throughout the college choice process and if social media influenced their decision to attend the university. All five students shared that what they saw on social media did not influence their decision to attend the university. This was because there was limited information that interested the students on the

social media accounts. Students were interested in hearing directly from current students. The university does not have students showcasing their experiences on social media. The students shared that the reason they attended the university was because of the cost of attending the university. The staff whom I interviewed shared that the reasons the admissions department joined social media was to rely on dates, deadlines, and information to prospective students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The social media content analysis showed the types of posts the account shared throughout March. Students shared that they wanted to hear directly from other students, but this was not currently reflected on social media platforms. The admissions staff shared that showcasing current students was something they wanted to implement in the future.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

Colleges and universities use social media to market and recruit students and have done so since 2010 (Barnes & Jacobson, 2013). As social media changes, it is essential to understand how prospective students use it and if it impacts their decision to attend college. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how prospective FTIC minority students from a university in a southwestern part of the United States use social media to make decisions about matriculating at a 4-year public university.

The research questions that guided the study focused on the students' use of social media during their college choice process and if the university's social media platform impacted their decision to attend the university. I collected data through semistructured interviews with five students and two staff participants. The research questions were as follows:

RQ1: How do prospective students use social media during their college choice processes?

RQ2: How do prospective students' perceptions of an institution's social media presence shape their decision to attend the university?

Chapter 5 discusses the study findings, implications, and recommendations for future research.

### **Discussion**

From the findings, I was able to determine that students use social media for further information gathering when identifying a college. However, for this participant group, social media did not impact the decision-making process. The students chose the university because of the low tuition.

The conceptual framework for the study, the college choice model by Hossler and Gallagher (1987), explained that during the college choice stage, paying for college is one of the

aspects that students consider prior to enrolling in a university. Also, the participants of the study were African American and Latino students. Prior research explains that the cost of college is important for minority students and impacts their decision in selecting which college to attend (Davidson et al., 2020; Goings & Sewell, 2019; Nienhusser & Oshio, 2017). Students shared that the reason they attended the university was due to the affordable cost of the tuition and that social media platforms had limited influence on the students. The social media platforms negatively shaped some participants' perceptions about the university as the students were not able to visualize all aspects of the university and campus life.

### ***Findings for Research Question 1***

The first research question was related to understanding how prospective students use social media during their college choice process. Five student participants shared their experience of choosing the university and how they used social media throughout their college choice process. Students expressed their opinions of the university social media platforms, the relevant information from the sites, and why they decided to attend the university. Also, I interviewed two admissions staff members. These individuals shared information about the admissions office social media page and future changes of the platforms.

All students shared that they used social media, primarily to connect with family and friends and as a medium for entertainment. All five participants shared that TikTok was a platform that they regularly used. Three out of the five participants used Instagram and Twitter. The results were consistent with those of previous research. Students are frequently on their phones, and 97% of students use one or more forms of social media (Beck & Wright, 2019; Paterson, 2017). Students explained that the social media sites for the university did not influence their decision to attend the university because the study site was not active on social

media. Also, participants explained that it was difficult to find information regarding student life, campus events, and student experiences online or on social media about SWUSC. The reason the students attended the university was because of the cost of tuition. When comparing the finding to Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage model of student college choice, this result was consistent with the college choice stage, which occurs when students are deciding to attend college during senior year. For many students, paying for college and feeling a connection to the university are the top two considerations when exploring plans after high school (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; T. Chapman et al., 2018; Han, 2014).

Staff members were also interviewed to understand the recruitment strategies and the use of social media within the admissions department. Both staff members reported that the admissions department began implementing social media due to the COVID-19 pandemic to reach students. The posts were informational and showcased the application deadlines for prospective students. However, the social media accounts did not include any videos of general information or videos of current students showcasing their experiences on campus, as recommended by Beck and Wright (2019), Han (2014), and Sandlin and Pena (2014). I also analyzed the university and admissions social media accounts. The content on both sites showed information about the university and upcoming events. However, neither site highlighted the student perspective at the university. This may be because students have been taking classes virtually due to the pandemic. Students have not been on campus since limited classes have been offered in person. Campus is shifting back to being in-person. This should allow the offices to highlight student perspectives on social media platforms.

In interviews, students expressed that they would like to see more videos from current students and learn more about the student organizations on social media. The students explained

the need for more information about life on campus. For example, one of the participants, Austin, explained that other universities were showcasing the student experience. He continued to describe that a university he was interested in had student takeovers on Instagram which allowed the prospective students to see a day in the life of a current student. An Instagram student takeover occurs when current students post on the social media platform and share a glance into campus life featuring campus facilities and involvement opportunities available to students (Tran, 2020). The staff participants explained that this is something that is planned for the future. This plan is due to the admissions team's social media being created during the COVID-19 pandemic to share dates, deadlines, and information quickly to students. As mentioned, this is something that both prior research and the participants agreed was an important factor when utilizing social media in the recruitment process. The general university social media sites used a limited number of hashtags in the posts. This is important to note because the student participants shared that when they were researching colleges, they used hashtags to find more information about the university.

### ***Findings for Research Question 2***

Understanding how prospective students' views of social media shape their decision to attend the university was the second research question. Students described that based on social media, there were mixed views of the university. Some students were unsure of what the university would be like. Other students knew that it would be a smaller university. The students did not think there would be a lot going on due to the size of the university. Once students came to campus, they saw the university and were happy with their decision. Students shared that there was limited information published about the student experience on social media, which impacted their view of campus life. Previous researchers have explained that students believe seeing



campus and the experiences of current students are a valuable aspect of engaging on social media (Beck & Wright, 2019). Keeping students engaged and adding student experiences from campus are important to prospective students (D. Johnson & Sveen, 2020; Paterson, 2017). This is in line with the conceptual framework of the study. During the college choice stage of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage model of student college choice, students consider feeling connected to the institution before deciding to attend.

The staff participants explained that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted how the university communicated with prospective students. The admissions department shared that the university relied on in-person events to make connections with students, which is in line with the study's conceptual framework. The staff are currently trying to ensure that the students have as much information about the university, dates, deadlines, and reminders as possible. Prior to the pandemic, the admissions staff shared that the main way to recruit students was during college fairs, campus visits, and presentations. This finding is in alignment with previous research from Chase et al. (2019), which expressed the need for personal communication throughout the recruitment process. The office also supported all aspects of the students going through the admissions funnel. Admissions counselors served as the person that would help students navigate through the process and have a student-centered admissions and recruitment approach. Stegmeir (2019) explained the need to strive for a student-centered approach to the admissions process and have information segmented to students based on their interest and needs. However, with the pandemic, the recruitment process changed and impacted the way recruitment occurred at the university.

When examining the social media platform for the university and the admissions site, there was limited information that allowed the students to see campus. This could have impacted

their decision to attend the university. V. Kumar and Nanda (2019) stated that Instagram is a useful resource to recruit students. Higher ed research company Target's 2020 study showed that 63% of participants followed or "liked" a college on Instagram. Some of the current study's participants followed or "liked" a college on Instagram. Others looked up colleges based on the university hashtag. The Office of Admissions' Instagram page highlights the important dates and deadlines for the application process. The general university Instagram account showcased campus highlights, reminders, and upcoming events. When interviewing students, I learned that they wanted to see more information from the current students on social media. Student participants stated that the reason they attend the university is the tuition cost of the university, but there was limited information on social media that showcased the cost of tuition and scholarship opportunities. Social media had little impact on the students' decision. When meeting with the staff members, I learned that the low cost of tuition is reflected on the social media pages. However, the staff plans to add student stories to the social media pages to showcase how the low tuition and scholarships available have impacted the students that currently attend the university.

### **Limitations**

Some limitations occurred during the study. One limitation was that all interviews took place via Microsoft Teams videoconferencing platform. This limited the number of participants willing to participate in the study. Conducting interviews via video platform caused distractions for participants including interruptions from loud noises, dogs barking, phone calls, and connection issues. Although the conversation was resumed once connection was restored, the participants were asked to repeat information that was missed during the disruption.

Recruiting students became challenging because students were participating in fully online classes. Many students did not respond to the invitation request to participate. It is unclear if the students did not read the email, were not interested in the study, or did not want to participate in the interview via Microsoft Teams. If more students would have responded to the invitation to participate in the study, the study and results would have varied. By having more students, it would have provided different perspectives and feedback regarding the social media and recruitment at SWUSC.

Also, I conducted the study at one campus. Therefore, the results may not be generalizable for all students. It is hard to determine if the results would have varied if I had conducted the case study at multiple universities. In addition, the university was not a robust user of social media. This caused a limitation within the study because participants were not able to utilize social media to research SWUSC as they did with other universities.

### **Implications**

I was able to demonstrate through the results of the study that students want to see social media posts from current students at SWUSC. During the college choice stage of the process students want to feel connected to the university (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Previous research addressed how students want to feel connected to the university and see the campus through social media via current students (Beck & Wright, 2019; Han, 2014; Sadlin & Pena, 2014). Student participants also expressed wanting to see more student experiences and sharing their stories.

Students expressed that they wanted to see more information from current students on social media. The students expressed the desire to have current students do Instagram takeovers to showcase their life as a current student. Several participants shared that this type of content is

on other social media platforms for different universities but not on the SWUSC page. By not having this information, the students' perceptions of the university were negative. They explained that they were coming because of the cost of tuition and scholarships that were received, not because of what they saw online, because limited information was posted about the student experience. There is a need to have students connected to the university and showcase the institution online by having current students share their experiences (T. Chapman et al., 2018; Chase et al., 2019; Clark et al., 2017). This allows the prospective students to begin imagining themselves on campus. By showcasing current students, it allows students to be exposed to resources and opportunities at the university. This study focused on minority students. Many of the participants were Latina. While this cannot be generalized to all Latinas, the university is considered a Hispanic-serving institution. Knowing that Latinas want to see other students on campus sharing their experiences is important to know. The information can help the admissions team by providing information and experiences that are valuable to the students.

Another aspect of the student decision is the cost of the university and scholarships the students received. This is also a deciding factor in the student choice stage, as shared by Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model. This finding is also in line with previous research such as Cartledge et al. (2015), Flaster (2018), and Muskens et al. (2019). Students look at financial aid, scholarships, and the cost of tuition as a deciding factor to attend college (Nienhuser & Oshio, 2017). This is a factor for minority students when exploring colleges, as higher cost of college, and finances can change the student's college pathway (Cox, 2016; Goings & Sewell, 2019; Hernandez, 2015; McCallen & Johnson, 2019; O'Conner et al., 2010; Rodriguez, 2015). While the university is known as one of the most affordable universities in the

area, this information was limited on the social media accounts. Cost is an important area for students in deciding whether to attend the university or not. It is important to include information about the financial aspect of college as well as showcasing students that have benefited from other opportunities.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings, there are recommendations for admissions professionals and future research. Improving the social media sites to showcase current students and daily life will be beneficial when recruiting future students. Working and collaborating with high school counselors on the recruitment of future students could assist universities with providing information that students are interested in throughout the admissions and recruitment process. Future research is needed to expand the research regarding social media in the recruitment and admissions process. As social media expands in popularity, it is imperative to continue to understand the impact it has on student recruitment. The study was limited to the southwestern United States region and focused on a small demographic of students, so the results may not be able to be generalized.

### ***Recommendations for Practice***

Admissions professionals, marketing departments, and other representatives at the university and in other higher education settings can use this information to create tailored social media and marketing strategies that address the interests and needs of students. Having a tailored social media plan can help provide students with additional information about the university they are interested in. Types of social media posts include student takeovers that show the daily life of current students. When there is a large Preview Day, campus event or other opportunity to bring students to campus, it will be imperative to have a social media component of the program as

well. This feature can include student panels, tours, department highlights, and admissions information. If students are unable to attend the event in person, providing a live option on social media can bring them to the university without leaving their homes.

Another area to improve is to have a variety of posts on the social media platform. Both the admissions and university pages have the same type of posts. There is limited video or other information on the page other than dates, deadlines, and reminders all in the blue background. While this creates continuity in branding, some important posts may get lost among the information. Creating posts that have the university photos as well as informational posts may bring students to the pages more frequently and help shape their opinion on the university. Another way to bring students to the page is to use hashtags on posts. Students shared that they use hashtags to find information about the universities. However, the study site's main university page did not use hashtags in any post, which may have limited the information that was being shared with prospective students. This was limiting the amount of people finding the information.

High school counselors and teachers may find the study helpful as they are working with students navigating the college process. In the interviews, students shared that their high school counselor helped influence their college journey. When assisting students with this process, it is important to know the options available to students as it relates to cost. Counselors should continue to host college fairs and invite as many universities to the events as possible. This will help expose students to universities that may not have been of interest previously. Also, counselors can work the admissions staff to share what students are looking for when going to college by partnering with the area high schools and creating a recruitment work group. This can help the admissions office with marketing and social media strategies. Collaborating with the

university to bring students to campus will be important moving forward. Another area in which admissions and high schools can work together to provide more information is by creating and implementing counselor updates yearly. This will allow the counselors to learn about the university and be updated regarding the process.

College is expensive for students and is a decision-making factor for students. It is important to show the cost, scholarships, and financial aid opportunities available to students. SWUSC is one of the most affordable universities in the region, but the cost and scholarship information is limited on social media. Throughout the study, students shared that they wanted to hear about the student experience from current students. It is valuable to provide financial aid information on social media platforms. This can be done by highlighting major scholarships on campus and showcasing students who have benefited from the program. For example, if the university has a full-ride scholarship program, it would be great to have the student share their experience of why they are attending the university, their major, and how the scholarship has impacted their life. If this is done by an Instagram takeover, the first slide can provide scholarship information, dates, and deadlines. Next, the student can explain how the scholarship has impacted their life and provide a student testimonial about the impact this has made on them. Finally, the last part of the Instagram story can be providing contact information, a website, and other information so a student can find the information after hearing from the student.

### ***Recommendations for Future Research***

Through the results of the study, I was able to understand how students use social media when deciding to attend college and if this impacts their college choice process. All participants attended high school in a metropolitan area, which excluded the perspective of students from other regions. There was a small number of students from one university that participated in my

study. Increasing the number of participants and including public and private universities will provide a broader understanding of how students use social media when researching college and universities. Future research is needed to explore how students use social media when deciding to attend college. It is important to understand what students are interested in seeing from colleges and universities on these platforms. Another study with more students in various universities might provide further insight into how students use social media when deciding where to attend college.

The demographic for my study was minority students. Four of the five participants were Latina. Future research could understand other demographics, including Asian, White, or African American, to understand if the data are consistent across all students or if the results change based on the student background. This will provide the researcher and universities with insight into how various groups use social media—for example, comparing the results based on demographics or gender to determine if different groups use social media differently or if students use the platforms in the same way.

Another recommendation is to interview current seniors in high school who are actively going through the college choice process. I interviewed students who were completing their second semester of their freshman year. Future researchers may consider conducting a similar study with high school seniors. This will give them the opportunity to learn the influence of social media while the students are actively making decisions about college, find out how students use social media to research college, and determine at what phase of the college search process they research information on social media.



**Summary**

From this study, I was able to examine how students use social media to decide where to attend college. Students and staff participated in semistructured interviews to express their experiences with recruitment, the admissions process, and use of social media. The results can be used to understand how students use social media and why the students did not find use of the university's social media platform useful during their college choice process. The results contribute to research; however, additional research is needed to explore in greater depth how social media impacts the student decision-making process.

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## Appendix A: Student Interview Protocol

Participant Name:

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Hello, my name is Skiler Jones. Thank you for taking time to talk to me today and participate in this interview. I am seeking to gain a better understanding of the influences that lead one to choosing a college. Your input will be helpful in providing insight. All information obtained will be kept strictly confidential, and all individual responses quoted in the final report will remain anonymous. To be sure that we have an accurate record of today's conversation, I am going to supplement my notes by audio-recording our interview. Is that okay?

Today is DATE/TIME, and I am speaking with PARTICIPANT NAME. I am going to be asking you a few general questions. If there is anything you do not feel comfortable answering or that you do not know the answer to, that is okay, just let me know, and we will skip the question.

Questions:

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
2. Why did you choose to attend this university?
3. Were you considering other colleges?

- a. Please describe how you made your decision about which college to attend
4. How many campuses did you visit when you were looking at colleges and universities?
  - a. When did you visit, and describe the experience?
  - b. How did you learn about the events?
5. Can you tell me about how you use social media?
6. Did you use social media when you were looking at colleges?
  - a. How did you use social media to learn about colleges?
7. Which social media sites did you use to learn about colleges?
8. Tell me about the social media sites you used when selecting a college.
9. What social media resources did you use to inform your decision in selecting the college you choose to attend?
10. What type of information did you find the most helpful from these social media sites? What made that social media post helpful?
11. In what ways did social media influence your final college selection, and did watching/reading posts provide confirmation that you made the right choice? Why? Why not?
12. Did social media help you confirm your college choice?
13. What content presentation, or information sharing techniques did these sites use that helped you make your decision?
14. How influential was social media on your choice to attend this university? How?
15. What information did you find most helpful? What was least helpful?
16. What recommendation do you have for social media sites and college marketing staff regarding the type of information you would like to see that would have helped you decide or help other prospective students make a decision?

17. Based on the information you saw on social media, what did you think the university would be like?

18. Is there anything that I did not ask you that you would like to share?

Thank you so much for participating in this interview. I appreciate your time and thoughts. After I have reviewed the transcript of our conversation today, may I contact you if I have further questions?

If you have any further questions for me, please do not hesitate to contact me at any time. A written transcript of this interview will be made available to you to verify accuracy of your views and experiences. You will hear back from me in one-two weeks with the transcript. As a reminder this information will remain confidential and will be destroyed at the end of the project. Let me confirm your email again. Do you have any final comments or questions?

Thank you and have a great rest of your day/evening.



## Appendix B: Staff Interview Protocol

Participant Name:

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Hello, my name is Skiler Jones. Thank you for taking time to talk to me today and participate in this interview. I am seeking to gain a better understanding of the influences that lead one to choosing a college. Your input will be helpful in providing insight. All information obtained will be kept strictly confidential, and all individual responses quoted in the final report will remain anonymous. To be sure that we have an accurate record of today's conversation, I am going to supplement my notes by audio-recording our interview. Is that okay? Today is DATE/TIME, and I am speaking with PARTICIPANT NAME. I am going to be asking you a few general questions.

Questions:

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself and your role at the university.
2. Please describe the university's recruitment strategy.
3. How would you define the university's strategy when using social media to recruit prospective students?
4. What social media sites does the university or admissions office use to reach prospective students?
5. Why did the university decide to start using social media to recruit students?
6. What are the university goals of social media when reaching prospective students?

7. In what ways was the department or university able to engage with prospective students on social media sites??
8. Would there be any future changes for social media in the recruitment process? If so, what?
9. Is there anything that I didn't ask that you would like to share?

Thank you so much for participating in this interview. I appreciate your time and thoughts. After I have reviewed the transcript of our conversation today, may I contact you if I have further questions?

If you have any further questions for me, please do not hesitate to contact me at any time. A written transcript of this interview will be made available to you to verify accuracy of your views and experiences. You will hear back from me in one-two weeks with the transcript. As a reminder this information will remain confidential and will be destroyed at the end of the project. Let me confirm your email again. Do you have any final comments or questions?

Thank you and have a great rest of your day/evening.

## Appendix C: IRB Approval

### ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

*Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World*

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103  
325-674-2885



December 6, 2021

Skilar Jones  
Department of Graduate and Professional Studies  
Abilene Christian University

Dear Skilar,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "Student Perceptions of Social Media in the Admissions Process",

(IRB# 21-168 ) is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

*Megan Roth*

Megan Roth, Ph.D.  
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs