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Nicole Mishnick 
Tarleton State University, USA

Dana Wise 
Tarleton State University, USA

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Social Media Engagement: An Analysis of the Impact of Social Media Campaigns on Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn

Nicole Mishnick, Dana Wise

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Abstract

Social media has revolutionized communication and changed how society accesses and receives information. As social media has become more prevalent, companies' advertising and marketing strategies worldwide have changed. In order to reach their target audience, organizations, including universities, have shifted their marketing plans to include social media. Research shows that social media campaigns enable universities to build positive relationships with potential undergraduate and graduate students. However, previous research on postgraduate social media use focuses on social media as a collective tool and does not analyze engagement by each platform. This study aimed to determine which social media platform, LinkedIn, Instagram, or Facebook, would have the highest engagement, as measured by likes, comments, and shares. Welch's NOVA indicated a statistically significant difference in the engagement between platforms. However, post hoc analysis only showed statistically significant differences between Facebook and Instagram. These findings suggest that while Facebook may yield higher engagement than Instagram and LinkedIn, universities should consider all platforms when utilizing social media as a recruitment tool in higher education.

Introduction

Social media has revolutionized communication and changed how society accesses and receives information (Nyangua & Bado, 2012). This shift in communication has not only impacted personal communication and connections but has also changed the way organizations engage with stakeholders. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, and LinkedIn allow organizations to reach larger audiences, disseminate information to their target audience, and gain feedback via social media interactions (Galan et al., 2015).

Companies' advertising and marketing strategies worldwide have shifted in response to increased social media use. Many organizations have integrated social media platforms into their marketing campaigns to reach their target audience (Arora & Sanni, 2019). Simultaneously, higher education institutions have faced an increasingly competitive market, leading to a reevaluation of their recruitment strategies (Whisman, 2011). In response, many universities have adopted innovative targeted marketing strategies utilizing social media as one of their main tools. Therefore, an increasing number of universities list social media campaigns as a central part of their recruitment plan (Lund & Wang, 2021).

As the use of social media in higher education has increased, research has shown that universities can build relationships online with current and potential undergraduate students (Lund & Wang, 2021). Galan et al. (2015) found that postgraduate students turned to social media to learn about student life, job opportunities, and potential fields of study. Similarly, Shields and Peruta (2019) reported that prospective students visit their chosen college's social media pages to solidify their choices. Previous scholars have established the importance of universities creating and maintaining social media pages as a recruitment tool. However, previous research on postgraduate social media use focuses on social media as a collective tool and does not analyze engagement by each platform.

This study aims to bridge the gap in existing research by examining specific engagement across three separate platforms: LinkedIn, Instagram, and Facebook. This study focuses on determining which platform has the most significant engagement and potential impact on recruiting Department of Educational Leadership and Technology students. User engagement will be measured by any interaction on social media, including likes, comments, and shares. Researchers will utilize the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1985) to interpret and understand the results. This study's findings contribute theoretically to understanding how universities utilize social media as a recruitment tool in higher education. The anticipated findings will offer insight into which platforms exhibit the highest engagement levels, thereby assisting educational institutions in refining their recruitment strategies to include social media.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study comes from Davis's (1985) work regarding the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). The TAM can be used to understand user behavior on social media platforms. According to the TAM, individuals are more likely to engage with technology when they perceive it as easy to use and believe it offers value to them (Davis, 1985). In the context of social media recruitment, users may engage more with a platform that is easy to use and has something of use to offer the user. Utilizing TAM may help understand why one social media platform resulted in more engagement than others. For this study, any interaction with a social media post will be considered engagement.

Related Literature

The Rise of Social Media

Social media, as defined by Kaplan and Haelein (2010), is "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundation of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (p. 61). Some scholars consider Email, which first appeared in 1971, as the earliest form of social media (Sajithra & Patil, 2013). Others argue that email is not social media as it functions solely as a distribution platform. However, researchers agree that the creation of Classmates.com in 1995 marked the beginning of social media as we know it today (Sajithra & Patil, 2013). In 2003, MySpace became the first social network to reach a global audience. However, the creation of Facebook in 2004 is one of the most significant social media moments in history. Facebook changed the social media landscape, quickly becoming one of the world's most significant social media platforms (Facebook Launches, 2019). Currently, a variety of popular social

media platforms exist, including Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, X, LinkedIn, and Snap.

The Current State of Social Media

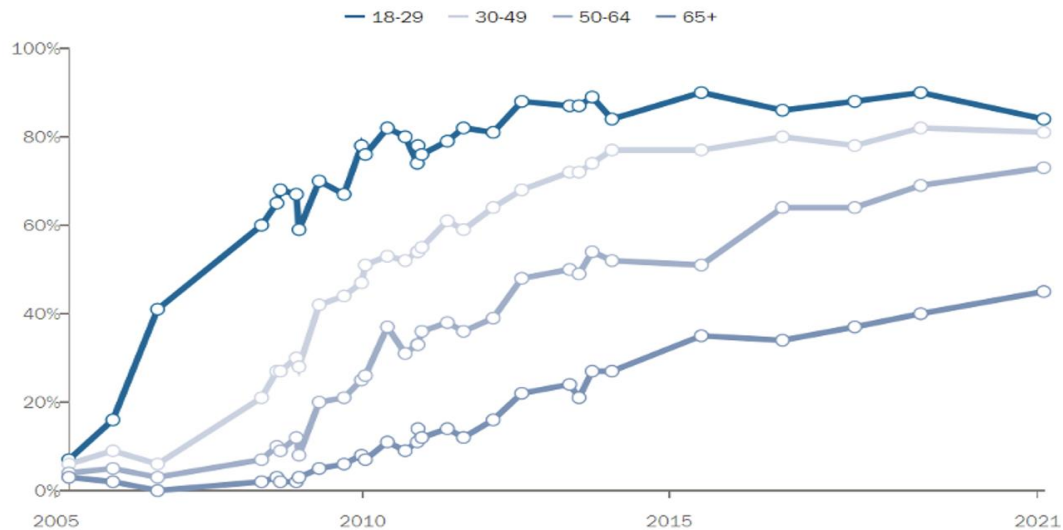
According to Bresnick (2021), Facebook and Instagram are currently the most popular social media sites and are important channels for reaching parents and Gen Z students. Similarly, Barnhart (2023) reported that Facebook has over 2.97 Billion users, making it the most popular platform in the world. As more Americans have embraced social media, social media users have become increasingly typical of the general public. As shown in Figure 1, older individuals have been using social media more recently, and young adults were among the first to utilize these platforms and still use them extensively (Pew Research Center, 2023). A complete listing of social media demographics, according to Barnhart (2023), is found in Table 1.

Table 1. Social Media Demographics

Comparison	Users	Primary Age Group	Time per Visit
Facebook	2.97 Billion	25-34	30 minutes
Instagram	2 Billion	18-24	30.1 minutes
LinkedIn	930 Million	30-39	7 minutes

Social media use by age

% of U.S. adults who say they use at least one social media site, by age



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.
Source: Surveys of U.S. adults conducted 2005-2021.

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Figure 1. Use of Social Media by Age

Social media is one of the most powerful forces in the world today, with over 4.89 billion users. As its popularity and use continue to increase, it is becoming an essential tool for organizations and consumers. Furthermore, the influence of social media is not decreasing, with a prediction of 5.85 billion users by 2027 (Zeller, 2023).

The future of social media marketing is video content. Research indicates that 86% of marketing experts favor utilizing video as a promotional medium. As a result, social media sites like Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, which are primarily video content, will continue to grow over the next five years. Figure 2 shows the expected social media use by social media platforms through 2025.

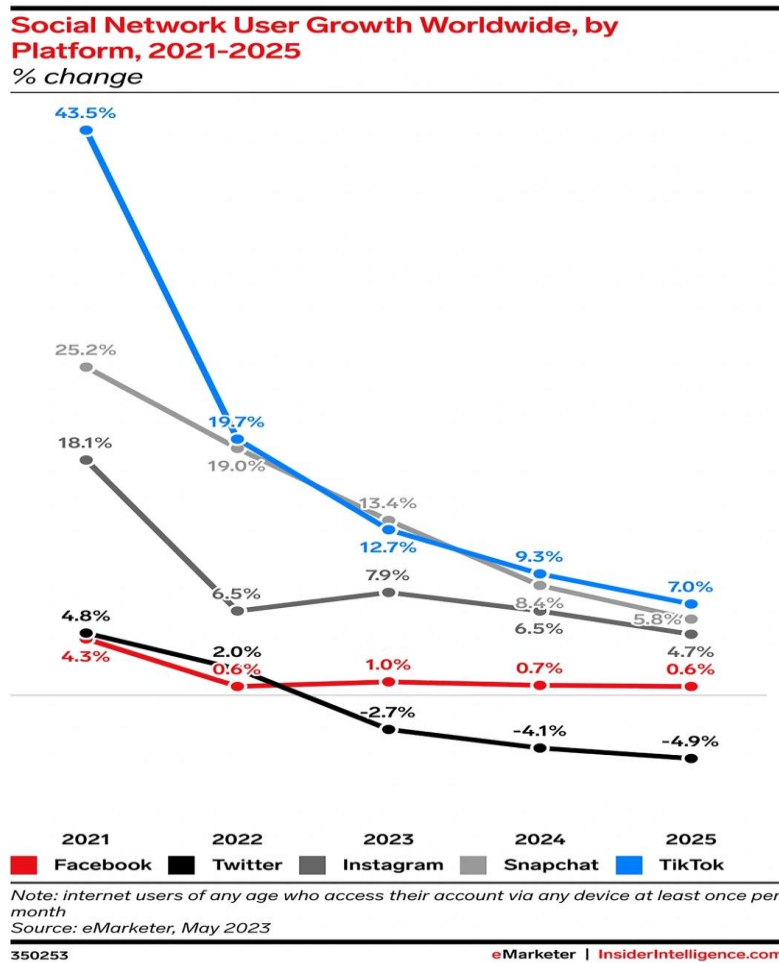


Figure 2. Use of Social Media Through 2025

Social Media as a Marketing Tool

Antwin and Oppong (2021) define social media marketing as the process of using social media technology and platforms to create, communicate, and deliver marketing products that increase the value of the company's stakeholders. Social media marketing enables businesses to leverage social media platforms to generate traffic to their official websites.

Social media allows organizations to reach larger audiences, push information out to their target audience, and gain feedback via social media interactions (Galan et al., 2015). As social media has become more popular, many organizations, including colleges and universities, have adopted social media as a marketing tool (Motta & Barbosa, 2018). People contact each other for help, advice, information, resources, and connections. Those who supply this type of information emerge as thought leaders and subject matter experts. Their viewpoints influence

decisions. Marketing leaders want people linked with their brand to lead those conversations (for example, team members and employee and customer advocates). The mission is to recruit brand ambassadors to help establish and manage these social media groups (Ku, 2023).

As the digital landscape makes online learning more appealing to many college-age students, higher education institutions are under increasing pressure to increase student recruitment efforts. Social media and online learning are great ways to reach more people and can significantly impact students debating between multiple colleges. By focusing on social media stories, educators can publish relatable and easily accessible content that appeals to prospective students (Digital Marketing Institute, 2023). Constantinides et al. (2012) suggested that recruiting staff in higher education may find it advantageous to closely monitor the behavior of the student market in terms of their social media use and how social media functions as an information source in their selection of a higher education institution and a program of study. Finally, from a recruiting aspect, it may be profitable to divide future student markets based on other characteristics such as lifestyle, behavior, and perceived benefits and contribute to developing new higher education institution marketing models.

As mentioned above, the future of social media marketing is video content. As video dominate social media continues to grow, companies that want to be competitive and marketable should produce excellent video content (Reach First, 2023). Creating video content for recruiting will be necessary in reaching the target audience.

Social Media Use in Higher Education

Initially, higher education institutions relied on limited marketing techniques, namely human contact and standard media messaging in the press, television, and radio. However, the rapid development of communication and information technology and the widespread adoption of the internet have aided in the introduction and use of social media (Pietrzak & Grębowiec, 2023). Previous research has shown that current and prospective students turn to social media to learn about and connect with universities (Xiong et al., 2018). Furthermore, according to Benedict et al. (2016), college students rely on social media to stay current with events and information.

They suggest that higher education institutions maintain a presence on social media and create campaigns specifically targeting prospective students. Graduate programs, in particular, can benefit significantly from well-planned and executed social media marketing strategies, and “educators at all levels have embraced the use of technology both in and out of the classroom, and some have discovered that social media can be a valuable tool for recruiting students and driving enrollment for their programs and institutions” (Comevo, 2021, np.). Previous research suggests that social media can be a powerful recruitment tool. However, further studies are necessary to determine which specific social media platform will increase engagement.

Research Questions

Research question for this study included:

Is there a statistically significant difference in engagement, as measured by likes, shares, and

comments, on a social media campaign focused on recruitment for the Educational Leadership and Technology program when posted on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram?

Method

Participants

Participants for this study included any individual who interacted with the social media campaign by liking, commenting, or sharing a post on Facebook, Instagram, or LinkedIn. There was no inclusion or exclusion of participants. Any individual who interacted with the social media campaign was considered a participant, and participants did not have to undergo a selection process.

Research Design

This study followed a between-subjects experimental design, with the social media platform as the independent variable and engagement, as measured by likes, shares, and comments, as the dependent variable. The study utilized Hootsuite to capture and measure engagement throughout the campaign. Engagement was considered any interaction with a post as a like, comment, or share.

The Campaign

The social media campaign utilized for this study focused on recruitment for the Department of Educational Leadership and Technology at a midsize university in Texas. The seven principles of successful social media campaigns, as defined by the Digital Marketing Institute (2018), were utilized to design the campaign. The principles and details of the campaign are:

1. Goals and Objectives: The campaign's goal was to raise awareness and increase interest in programs offered by the department.
2. Language: To reach the target audience of educators and professionals with bachelor's degrees, professional and academic language was used throughout the campaign.
3. Channels: The campaign ran on Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn
4. Timing: Posts were made three times per week during the day. Initially, posts were made on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. However, that was changed halfway through the campaign. At the start of the campaign, engagement was minimal, less than five engagements per post. Therefore, the authors changed the days and timing of the post. Statusbrew (2023) states that posting during peak hours can increase engagement. However, each platform's peak posting window is different. In order to maintain consistency within the study, posting times remained consistent across platforms.
5. Visual and Action Oriented: The department logo was used throughout the campaign, as well as images and icons related to the university and associated with advanced degrees.
6. Social Responsibility: The campaign included posts about an advanced degree's impact on education and the teaching profession.
7. Experience-Based: The campaign included very factual posts and posts that aimed at an emotional

response. Additionally, some posts had a call to action or surveys.

The campaign ran on Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn for eight weeks in July and August 2023. The campaign utilized social media platforms that the university previously approved and supported. To maintain uniformity across platforms and reduce the probability of post content influencing engagement, posts across platforms were identical. The campaign ended at the conclusion of the eight weeks, but the department continued posting on social media. However, the ongoing posts were less frequent, and engagement was not measured as they were outside this study.

Data Collection

Before the campaign launch, the authors submitted an IRB. IRB found the study exempt. Since posting on social media is a routine process for the university, and the risks were deemed minimal, consent was not required. Ad Edge Digital Marketing (2020) suggests running a social media campaign for 45-60 days. Therefore, the Educational Leadership and Technology Recruitment campaign ran for eight weeks. Hootsuite was used to monitor post-engagement for each platform. Any engagement with a post, including a like, comment, or share, was considered engagement. Engagement was measured per post and was reported by engagement type (like, comment, share).

Data Analysis

According to Aroraa and Sanni (2019), social-media-based research studies are generally quantitative. Previous studies have used descriptive and quantitative statistics to determine individuals' interactions and responses to social media posts (Dodoo & Padovano, 2020). Therefore, for this study, quantitative data was analyzed using a two-stage process. First, the authors analyzed the descriptive statistics to determine the engagement level, as measured by interactions (likes, shares, comments), for the social media campaign on each platform. Secondly, they ran a one-way ANOVA to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between the mean engagement level by platform.

Levene's Test of Homogeneity of Variance

Before running the one-way ANOVA, Levene's test was run to determine if the assumption of equal variances across social media platforms was met. The results indicated a statistically significant difference in variance across social media platforms (Levene's statistic = 4.746, $p=.0013$). Since Levene's test indicated a significant difference in variances across social media platforms, an alternative statistical test, Welch's ANOVA, was run.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Statistics

During July and August 2023, the authors launched a social media campaign on Facebook, LinkedIn, and

Instagram. During the eight-week campaign, the authors posted an average of three posts per week for a total of 21 posts on Facebook, 19 on LinkedIn, and 18 on Instagram. Instagram and LinkedIn had fewer posts due to access issues with the accounts.

When the campaign started, access to LinkedIn and Instagram was limited. By the time access was granted, the authors had made the initial social media posts on Facebook. Descriptive statistics for each platform are listed in Table 2, with a breakdown of engagement by platform displayed in Figure 3.

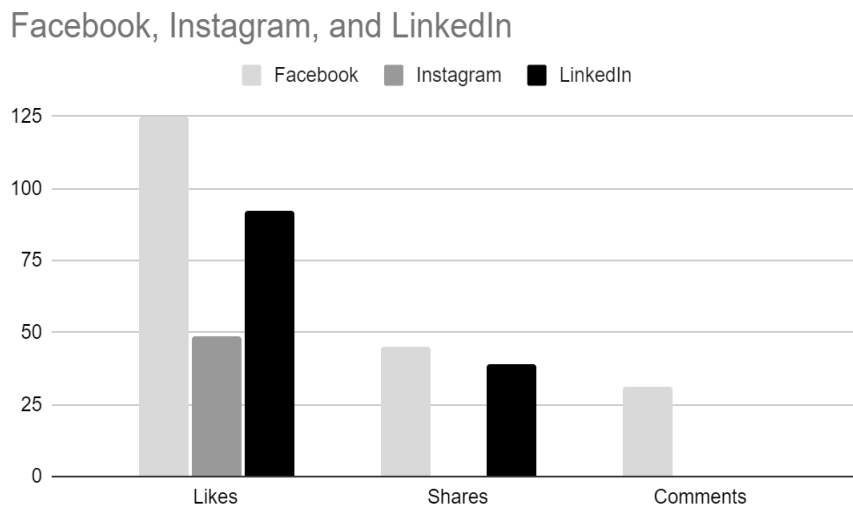


Figure 3. Comments, Likes, and Shares by Platform

Table 2. Total Engagement per Platform

Platform	Engagement	Mean	St. Dev.
Facebook	201	9.57	2.06
Instagram	49	3.06	.79
LinkedIn	131	6.89	1.43

Research Question

Welch's ANOVA was conducted to answer the research question, which explored the significant difference in engagement, as measured by likes, shares, and comments, on a social media campaign focused on recruitment for the Educational Leadership and Technology program when posted on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram. The means of the three conditions were unequal according to Welch's statistic, $WelchF(2, 53) = 5.974, p = .006$. A pairwise comparison of the means using Tukey's Honesty Significant Difference indicated only one significant comparison.

Average engagement on Facebook ($M = 9.57$) was found to be significantly ($p = .02$) higher than engagement on Instagram ($M = 3.06$), with a 95% confidence interval of the difference of means from .87 to 12.15. The difference in engagement between Facebook and LinkedIn and LinkedIn and Instagram was not statistically significant. A complete list of post hoc results is listed below in Table 3.

Table 3. Platform Comparison

Comparison	Difference	Std. Error	Sig.
Facebook vs. LinkedIn	2.677	2.231	.459
Facebook vs. Instagram	6.509	2.338	.020
LinkedIn vs. Instagram	3.832	2.391	.253

Overview of the Campaign Success

The Department of Educational Leadership and Technology conducted an eight-week social media campaign to increase engagement in programs offered at the university. The campaign ran on three social media platforms: Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram. Although the campaign was designed and run according to best practices, overall engagement was lower than anticipated. Initially, engagement was minimal, with multiple posts receiving zero likes, comments, or shares. However, as the campaign progressed, engagement slowly increased. This trend aligns with Bresnick's (2021) recommendation to frequently post on social media during a campaign to increase engagement. Engagement increased by the second week of the campaign, with the largest engagement occurring during the campaign's final week. Additionally, throughout the campaign, five students requested additional information about graduate programs offered at the university.

Although overall engagement was lower than anticipated, the campaign was considered successful. Engagement increased over the eight weeks; students requested information about the university, and by the end of the campaign, interactions were occurring on every platform. The authors recommend that the department continue posting on all platforms to keep engagement levels high, grow the platform's following, and increase the overall reach of the social media accounts.

Engagement Disparities across Platforms

Descriptive statistics revealed variances in engagement levels across all three platforms. Over two months, Facebook had the highest engagement per post (9.57). LinkedIn was second, with 6.89 engagements per post, followed by Instagram, with an average of 3.06 interactions per post. Based on total engagement, it appears the Facebook campaign was the most successful. Facebook is the most widely used social media platform worldwide (Barnhart, 2023), so the higher overall engagement on Facebook is not surprising.

Additionally, the college established a Facebook account before the campaign started. In the months leading up to the targeted campaign, the Facebook page was active, with multiple posts celebrating students who graduated, spotlighting the department, and showcasing upcoming events. Therefore, the platform already had an established presence and following. The LinkedIn account existed before the campaign, but the department only made regular posts once the campaign started. The Instagram account came into existence due to the social media campaign. Although the authors shared the page and encouraged individuals to follow the newly created page, Facebook and LinkedIn had more followers.

The difference in average engagement, as measured by descriptive statistics, aligns with the activity of each platform prior to the start of the campaign. Facebook yielded the highest engagement and had an established account before the study. Instagram, the platform with the lowest engagement, was created specifically for the campaign. Now that the department has established all three accounts, the authors recommend an additional study. While descriptive statistics provide an initial understanding of campaign performance, Welch's ANOVA delivers a more holistic interpretation.

Welch's ANOVA and Post Hoc Tests

Welch's ANOVA indicated a statistically significant difference in the mean engagement level across the social media platforms $WelchF(2, 53) = 5.974, p = .006$. This finding suggests that engagement varied significantly between the platforms. However, post hoc analysis using Tukey's HSD found that the only statistically significant difference in engagement existed between Facebook and Instagram. This finding highlights the effectiveness of Facebook in creating engagement through likes, shares, and comments.

Post hoc analysis did not find a statistically significant difference in the engagement between Facebook ($M = 9.57$) and LinkedIn ($M = 6.89$). The overall and average engagement on Facebook was higher than on LinkedIn, the non-significant results suggest insufficient evidence to conclude there are actual differences in the engagement between LinkedIn and Facebook.

Similarly, while the average engagement on LinkedIn ($M = 6.89$) was higher than on Instagram ($M = 3.06$), the difference was not statistically significant. Therefore, while Facebook did yield higher engagement, LinkedIn and Instagram may be comparable in their impact on social media users' engagement. It is important to note that small sample sizes and limited posts may have limited variability within the group.

Results in Relation to Technology Acceptance Model

This study found that a statistically significant difference in engagement existed between social media platforms. This finding could align with TAM's assertion that users' perception of ease of use and usefulness impact their interactions with technology. Since Facebook had the highest engagement, users may perceive the platform as more straightforward and easier to navigate. Additional studies, with a qualitative piece, may offer additional insight into why users prefer Facebook over other platforms.

Practical Implications

This study's findings align with previous scholars' assertions that social media could and should be used as a recruitment tool in higher education (Benedict et al., 2016; Motta & Barbosa, 2015). The increased engagement throughout the campaign and the request for additional information speak to the campaign's overall success. Therefore, the authors suggest that institutions integrate social media campaigns into their marketing strategies. Reaching potential students through social media will lead to a more comprehensive and robust marketing

campaign.

Platform Selection

The Pew Research Center (2021) reports the average age of Facebook users to be significantly higher than that of Instagram users, with the majority of young adults using Instagram and TikTok. Based on this, institutions may prioritize Instagram over Facebook. However, findings from this study suggest that for recruitment purposes, Facebook demonstrates higher engagement than Instagram. Therefore, educational institutions aiming to maximize their outreach should ensure that Facebook is part of their recruitment strategy.

Additionally, the Pew Research Center (2021) found that users with a formalized education were likelier to use LinkedIn than users with no formal education. This statistic suggests LinkedIn is a preferred platform when recruiting for graduate programs, as many users already possess an undergraduate degree. This study did not find a statistically significant difference in engagement between Facebook and LinkedIn, further supporting the use of LinkedIn in a social media recruitment campaign.

Overall Recommendations

Overall, Facebook yielded higher engagement than LinkedIn and Instagram. This finding aligns with reports from Barnart (2023) and the Pew Research Center (2021), which report that Facebook has more overall users than other platforms. Based on the overall findings, social media should be incorporated into higher education institutions marking plans. If universities are limited to one platform, Facebook would be the top choice. However, LinkedIn and Instagram also resulted in engagement and should not be dismissed.

Monitoring and Adjusting

Successful social media campaigns are designed and implemented to maximize the odds of capturing social media users' attention (Statusbrew, 2023). However, social media dynamics often fluctuate based on preferences, which may evolve. Therefore, institutions should continually monitor their social media campaigns and make adjustments based on user behavior. For example, if posts made early in the day do not result in engagement, campaign managers should move the posts to a different time of day. Additionally, different posts may perform differently on each platform, so the campaign should be adjusted to maximize engagement on each platform.

Generalizability

This study focused on a social media campaign for a graduate and doctoral program. However, the findings can be extended to various academic disciplines, especially programs that offer graduate and doctoral degrees. Due to the demographics of prospective students, the results may not apply to undergraduate programs. Furthermore, the authors conducted this study at a mid-sized university that has yet to have a nationwide following. Therefore, the results may not be generalizable to more prominent universities with a more established brand.

Limitations

Although this study found a statistically significant difference in engagement between social media platforms, it is not without limitations. When the campaign started, the department already had an established Facebook and LinkedIn page. Therefore, their total number of followers was higher, likely leading to increased engagement. The authors created the Instagram account at the beginning of the campaign, and as the number of followers increased, so did engagement. Therefore, the lower engagement may have resulted from fewer overall followers. Additionally, the campaign was only run for eight weeks, a relatively short period. Had the campaign run longer, engagement across all platforms likely would have increased. Further, the study only relied on quantitative data (likes, shares, and comments) incorporating a qualitative analysis, such as asking participants why they engaged with different posts, which would offer a more comprehensive understanding of engagement across each platform.

The final limitation that needs to be acknowledged is the chosen platforms. This study utilized Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn because they were pre-approved by the university. However, as social media continues to grow and evolve, other platforms, such as TikTok, X, and Snapchat, are popular among teenagers and young adults. Their popularity may yield higher engagement than Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn.

Recommendations

While findings from this study suggest that a recruitment campaign on Facebook would yield the highest engagement, additional studies in this area are recommended. Specific suggestions for additional studies include a longer campaign across additional platforms, including TikTok and Snapchat, a study that tailors posts based on the platform, and a study that analyzes each post's reach or views in tandem with engagement. Additionally, adding a qualitative component to the study would offer insight into why users engaged with each post. Understanding the motivations and preferences of social media users would offer valuable insight into the creation and design of social media campaigns targeted at higher education recruitment.

Studies also identify short-form videos to provide an exceptional opportunity to highlight a university's culture, values, and academic programs in a manner that appeals to the target audiences. (Khan, 2023). To remain competitive in an ever-changing digital economy, higher education institutions must understand the value of short-form video and incorporate it into their marketing strategy. Therefore, an additional study utilizing a video campaign is recommended.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the impact of a social media campaign across three separate social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. An eight-week campaign focused on recruiting graduate and doctoral students was designed and posted before the fall semester. Overall, the campaigns were successful, resulting in increased engagement on all social media platforms. Facebook yielded the highest engagement; however, the level of engagement was not statistically significant when compared to LinkedIn. Instagram had the lowest engagement,

but it increased over the eight weeks. Therefore, universities should use targeted social media campaigns as a marketing tool, especially in departments that offer graduate degrees. Universities, specifically graduate programs, should consider running targeted social media campaigns on their university's social media platforms. A robust social media presence will allow universities to build relationships with students and garner interest in the university and its programs.

As social media and digital tools continue to evolve, institutions must leverage social media as a recruitment tool for their programs. This study highlights the impact of social media and serves as evidence that social media campaigns are a powerful recruitment tool.

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Author Information

Nicole Mishnick

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5148-7064>


Tarleton State University

1333 W Washington St

Stephenville, TX 76401

USA

Dana Wise

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0412-7343>

Tarleton State University

1333 W Washington St

Stephenville, TX 76401

USA

Contact e-mail: danam.wise@gmail.com
