

Perceived Benefits of Participation in the “Class of” Facebook Pages

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Abstract

Given its popularity, institutions are looking for ways to capitalize on Facebook to market, recruit, and engage students during the admission and matriculation processes. One approach is the development of “Class of” Facebook pages for admitted students. This interpretivist case study

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explores first-year students' perceptions of participating in a regional research university's "Class of" Facebook page. Uses and Gratification theory is used to identify the student needs being met through the use of these pages. Findings included students' benefit from these pages by seeking information, learning normative behaviors and developing a sense of community.

An estimated 90 percent of college-age students use some form of social media (Kruger, 2013). Facebook is the most popular social networking site and is prominent in the lives of high school and college students. Given its popularity, colleges and universities are looking for ways to capitalize on Facebook to recruit perspective applicants and engage students throughout the admission and matriculation process (Barns & Jacobsen, 2012; Constantinides & Stagno, 2011; Hayes, Ruschman, & Walker, 2009). One approach institutions are taking is to create "Class of" Facebook pages for admitted students, often named for the year incoming students should graduate, typically four years after matriculating. For example, students admitted in fall 2014 can join an institution's Class of 2018 Facebook page. Individuals may use these pages to interact with peers admitted to the same institution, ask questions about the matriculation process, and make connections with individuals who share similar interests. Although many institutions have created "Class of" pages they often have limited understanding for how their students perceive them and if they are meeting incoming students' needs.

The purpose of this interpretivist case study is to explore first-year students' perceptions of participation in a regional research university's "Class of" Facebook page. The general research question guiding the study asks how recently admitted first-year undergraduates experience the "Class of" Facebook page. Data were collected from participants using a focus group and journaling. The approach to data analysis included using codes developed from Uses and Gratification theory (UG) to help understand participants' perceptions of these pages and the socially situated interactions they experienced. During weekly meetings, we discussed preliminary themes and findings, and later the implications for the study. This study identified students' perceived benefits of one technology as they transition into their first year and can assist with future research related to student use of technology during the matriculation process.

Literature Review

Facebook is a social networking site (SNS) with over 845 million active users across the globe, and over 100 billion collective connections on the site (Alexander, 2012). It has quickly become an important part of most college students' daily routines, with individuals logging in for an average of thirty minutes per day (Alexander, 2012; Eberhardt, 2007; Giannakos, Giotopoulos, & Chorianopoulos, 2013; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009; Qiu, Lin, & Leung, 2013). Facebook is a user-friendly platform for building social networks among people with shared interests, friendships, or ideas (Coyle & Vaughn, 2008). As a form of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), which is defined as "a process of human communication via com-

puters, involving people, situated in particular contexts, engaging in processes to shape media for a variety of purposes” (December, 1997, p. 1), Facebook allows students to learn about their peers and the culture at their undergraduate institution. At the same time, peers have the ability to form impressions of each other and therefore self-monitor the information they provide on their profiles and posts (Birnbaum, 2013).

Use of Social Networking Sites at Institutions of Higher Education

High school and college students are comfortable receiving information about institutions via websites, blogs, instant messaging, email, and texting (Noel Levitz, 2012). Institutions have recognized that prospective students expect them to integrate e-communication plans within more traditional marketing plans (Wandel, 2008). With the growth of Facebook use among younger generations, institutions are exploring opportunities to use the site as a cost-effective way to market, recruit, and engage students during the admission and matriculation process (Barns & Jacobsen, 2012; Constantinides & Stagno, 2011; Hayes, Ruschman, & Walker, 2009). It is now known that using social networking in the recruitment process can increase enrollment, link potential students to online information and processes, heighten interest and relationships with the institution, and influence perceptions (Hayes, Ruschman, & Walker, 2009).

Research shows that administrators’ familiarity with SNS and use on college campuses is increasing (Barns & Jacobsen, 2012). Studies reviewed show that usage of social networking by admissions offices increased by

58 percent over a two-year period. Ninety-one percent of administrators surveyed considered SNS important for recruiting at their institutions and most indicated plans to increase usage in the future (Barns & Jacobsen, 2012). Greenwood (2012) found 92 percent of institutions using social media sites, and of those, 99 percent using Facebook as their primary SNS. With a large percentage of prospective students using social media, colleges must adapt their recruitment strategies (Greenwood, 2012). Additionally, institutions should examine their usage of SNS during a student's matriculation into an institution.

Use of Social Networking Sites During Transition

Understanding how students use SNS during the transitional period between high school and college will influence universities' SNS design to meet students' social and academic needs. When exploring high school students' use of Facebook, Fewkes and McCabe (2012) concluded that the most popular activities were checking status updates and updating their own status. Another study explored the influence of belonging and friendship during this transitional phase found a link between students' sense of belonging at the institution and a positive self-perception of their social acceptance and academic competence (Pittman & Richmond, 2008). This suggests important factors for students' successful transition to college: a sense of belonging at their university is connected to establishing positive friendships at their institution (Pittman & Richmond, 2008).

Students use SNS during their college search process to determine their ability to fit in and feel comfortable at a particular institution (College Board and the Art and

Science Group, 2009). Survey results indicate students looked at these sites to see if people they knew were attending the institution, searched comments about the school specifics, identified student groups, and viewed pictures of students attending the institution (College Board and the Art and Science Group, 2009). In addition, student usage behavior may change once a final enrollment decision is made, at which time the pages are used to seek information on institutional services and programs such as study abroad, living and learning communities, the Honors Program, and financial aid (College Board Art and Science Group, 2009).

Conceptual Framework

Uses and Gratification (UG) theory provides an explanation of the motivations for using media and it was selected for this study for its usefulness in understanding why individuals might visit "Class of" Facebook pages. According to UG theory, individuals use media to satisfy cognitive, affective, personal integrative, and social needs as well as to release tension (Katz, Haas, & Gurevitch, 1973; Leung, & Wei, 2000; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Ruggiero, 2000; Shao, 2008; Tosun, 2012; Wimmer, & Dominick, 2003). Cognitive needs are those that strengthen knowledge and understanding of a social phenomena or setting. Affective needs are those connected to an individual's emotional state. Personal integrative needs include strengthening confidence, credibility, and status among peers. Social needs are those addressed by interaction and often focus on relationships with family and friends. Finally, tension release refers to the need to es-

cape from life stressors and responsibilities (Katz, Haas, & Gurevitch, 1973).

UG theory has been used to explore television and radio use among children and adults (Ruggiero, 2000). More recently UG has been applied to computer and mobile device communications (Leung, & Wei, 2000; Raacke, & Bonds-Raack, 2008; Ruggiero, 2000; Shao, 2008). Leung & Wei (2000) found the use of mobile phones gratified cognitive, affective, personal and social needs as identified by Katz, Haas, & Gurevitch in 1973. Shao (2008) used UG to identify and explain the appeal of popular user-generated media (UGM) like YouTube, MySpace, and Wikipedia. He found UGM was used to fulfill information needs, provide entertainment, and to manage user's moods.

UG theory has also been used to explore college students' interaction with SNS, including Facebook, and found the majority frequent these sites for social interactions and as a source of information (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). Furthermore, college students use Facebook for gathering and sharing information about events and other people, maintaining current friendships, making new friends, and feeling connected to the community, as predicted by UG theory (Bonds-Raacke & Raacke, 2010). Additional research found that students use Facebook for socializing, entertainment, maintaining personal status and identity, and gathering information (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009). We compared UG categories to needs being met by participants in this study and found they aligned.

Methodology

We adopted an interpretive perspective for the study because Facebook is a forum for social interaction and socially created meaning (Crotty, 1998). Interpretivists believe reality is socially constructed and exists within the context of interconnected systems (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). The primary goal of interpretivist studies is to better understand participant perspectives of a situated phenomena (Crotty, 1998), in this case the perceived benefits of the “Class of” Facebook page.

Case study research focuses on a bounded system and is ideal for exploring “complex social units with multiple variables, housed in real-life situations” (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006, p. 53). It is useful in educational research because phenomena can be examined to bring about understanding that improves practice (Merriam, 2001). This bounded system consisted of first-year students who participated in the “Class of” Facebook page prior to matriculating at Rocky Mountain Institution (RMI). A heuristic case study was used based on interest in providing an understanding of this social phenomenon (Merriam, 2001).

Site Description and Participant Selection

RMI is a regional, public, four-year, mid-sized, research-intensive institution near the Rocky Mountains. We used criterion sampling to identify potential participants (Mertens, 1998). Criteria included recently admitted students, between the ages of 18 and 19 years old, who had not enrolled at another institution, and participated in the university sponsored “Class of” Facebook page during the transition. Participants were active on Facebook and

regularly created posts, liked pages, joined groups, and added friends. The "Class of" Facebook page at RMI was co-created with staff in the enrollment management and admissions offices. We posted an invitation for site users on the "Class of" Facebook page to participate in the research study at the beginning of the fall semester, directing interested participants to contact us via an email address provided in the post. We selected participants who responded and whose schedule permitted attendance at a focus group meeting.

Five participants took part in this study, four identified as female, Anna, Molly, Kelly, and Sally, and one identified as male, Larry. Pseudonyms have been assigned to protect all students' identities. Four participants belonged to a campus leadership program. All were active users on the "Class of" Facebook page before arriving on campus.

Data Collection

A 50-minute focus group was conducted with the participants using a semi-structured interview format, giving researchers freedom to add questions and explore new ideas based on participant's responses (Berg, 2007). The focus group was held on campus during the sixth week of the fall semester. This allowed participants to experience the institution before asking them to reflect on the perceived benefits of the "Class of" Facebook page. A focus group allowed us to develop and understand the meaning of the students' experiences on the Facebook page through an explorative conversation.

An initial guide outlined seven questions developed to explore the phenomenon (Kelly, 2003). Questions were

designed to collect data about participants' goals for joining the "Class of" Facebook page and the benefits they gained from online interaction. The focus group was digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Following the focus group, participants were asked to reflect and journal about their experiences with the "Class of" Facebook page. Participant journaling occurred one time within 48 hours following the focus group. Participants were asked to provide additional information about their use of the "Class of" Facebook page once the focus group was completed and they processed the discussion.

Data Analysis

Analysis was completed of the verbatim transcription with line-by-line open and axial coding. This approach allowed the researchers to discover relationships between codes and to generate categories and themes (Mertens, 1998). Open coding helped to examine the data for similarities and differences and axial coding directed us to make connections between categories and sub-categories (Priest, Roberts & Woods, 2002). A software program, QDA MinerLite v1.2.1 - (Copyright 2004-2013) was used to assist in the coding process.

Twenty-five codes were developed, which combined into three major categories: seeking information, seeking relationships, and relevance of Facebook as a source of social media. Seeking information encompasses information about the institution, the matriculation process and the participants' new community. Seeking relationships refers to meeting people, identifying community members, and finding individuals with similar interests. Relevance includes timeliness of the information shared, the familiar-

ity of Facebook as the medium, and the efficient delivery method of Facebook.

After identifying themes, we participated in writing as inquiry to understand and categorize findings. Writing as inquiry allowed us to discover and explore reactions to the data (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2000). Thoughts were submitted individually, and we collectively discussed the data and constructed findings. This method of analysis instigated theory connection as well as the determination of findings.

Researcher Positionality

Four of the five researchers are doctoral students enrolled in a student affairs program. The fifth researcher is a faculty member who helped direct the study. All are employed at institutions of higher education, with two employed at the research site. We are each white, middle class, highly educated individuals. Four of the five have Facebook profiles and participate on the site.

Trustworthiness

Establishing trustworthiness requires continuity and congruence among all elements of the qualitative research process (Jones et al., 2006). In addition, qualitative research must adhere to the elements of goodness, which requires alignment of epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, method, participant selection, analysis and interpretation, and presentation. We intentionally promoted continuity and congruence when the transcript was interpreted. We all agreed on codes established and how these assisted in formulating findings during weekly conversations. This practice assisted in alignment of quali-

tative research components, meeting the requirements of goodness.

Limitations

Data for this study was collected at a single institution and during a predetermined time period. We are unaware of any specific institutional characteristics that might otherwise affect our data but caution readers about generalizing our findings. As an interpretivist study, we are interested in understanding the phenomena from our participants' perspectives and not generalizability. Given our relatively small number of participants, readers should treat our findings with some caution.

Findings

Information Seeking

As predicted by UG theory, one of the primary reasons participants used the "Class of" page was to locate information to strengthen their knowledge and understanding of the institution, the campus community, and specific tips for starting college. Our participants' general approach to gathering information was to read the questions and comments posted by others users of the site. Although none of our participants asked questions on the page, they found the information provided by their peers helpful. They did agree that responses to questions asked on the page were beneficial in learning about the process and steps necessary to matriculate. Larry shared,

When people would ask questions ... I was thinking that too and I would scroll through some of the comments. Just stuff like how do I apply for the university scholarship. Stuff that you knew you had

to do before you came up here but weren't guided through exactly.

Larry's response illustrates that prospective students often have similar questions and are relieved when their peers ask them. However, like our participants, many admitted students chose not to ask questions themselves and instead relied on questions asked by others to acquire information that would be helpful to the matriculation process. This approach ensures that individuals will not embarrass themselves by asking "dumb" questions and affirms that they are thinking like their peers.

Other participants shared similar experiences and agreed page administrators' answers were helpful as they learned about the institution. Some indicated being unaware of steps in the matriculation process until reading the comments posted in response to questions asked on the page. The question and answer process on the page created a chain of comments with dates, information, and steps. Kelly stated, "Even if you don't ask questions, you can watch the posts from others. Mostly the ones I saw I didn't think about until I saw someone else ask them." Molly referenced learning about a scholarship deadline after comments were posted on the page. Larry discussed finding out about a program application from page posts.

Participants relied on the page for information identified by the researchers as "just in time." This collection of information assisted in the students' preparation for coming to college and allowed them to meet the UG theory need of personal integration by relying on the right information at the right time for them. They recalled receiving mailings and emails about the process; however, they felt the information on the page was more timely and

beneficial. Anna remembered receiving information about the move-in process via the page:

Questions like what's the best time to move in and where do we meet when we move in, ... even though a lot of that stuff was mailed to us, I think that it's a lot easier to write it on Facebook and get a response.

As this quote illustrates, the page provided information at the right time from Anna's perspective. Other "just in time" information discussed on the page included what to bring, and how to purchase books. While participants discussed finding important information on the Facebook page, none questioned its validity or seemed to critically question if the responses were accurate.

Normative Behaviors

Normative behaviors are those activities and values common to incoming students. Although the term is not used explicitly in the UG literature, we believe normative behaviors represent a combination of personal integrative, social, and cognitive needs as defined by the theory. Participants discussed learning normative behaviors from observing and interacting with peers on the page and identifying individuals with shared interests. Often referred to non-pejoratively as "Facebook stalking" in the focus group, observing other students' profiles provided an effective means for learning about clothing, music, living arrangements, and extracurricular activities. Sally described using the "Class of" page in the same manner to learn about "what the school is about and who the people are that are going to be there." This quote illustrates Sally's desire to learn about the community norms prior to arrival. For par-

ticipants, Facebook stalking provided an opportunity to identify potential group norms. For example, Anna mentioned observing several quotes about the television character Dr. Who on the page. This allowed her to identify individuals with this common interest.

This recognition of social needs and personal integration into the lives of students again relates to UG theory. The social needs of the participants to understand and connect with their future community were met with topics of conversation on the Facebook page. Students were strengthening their confidence regarding their ability to find commonalities with new peers and finding potential social groups. This combines cognitive and affective elements of UG theory, as well as initiates the development of social need by introducing students to peers with shared interests and integrates the norms of a student with those of students in the new communities (Katz, Haas, & Gurevitch, 1973). Students' ability to personally identify and incorporate themselves within the community by finding similar interests allows for early personal integration with their new social world.

Facebook stalking also allowed participants to see who was coming to campus, identifying potential acquaintances or friends based on living arrangements, interests, and majors. Larry commented,

On the first day when I walked in [to class] it was this whole room of faces I knew from the Facebook page so I sat with them and it helped me meet others in my major at least and having a study group and finding people in the same classes.

Instances of Facebook stalking allowed participants to identify other incoming students before matriculation and

this familiarity assisted with face-to-face interactions once classes started. This recognition provided greater information, knowledge and understanding of their future community, and met the cognitive need of UG theory (Katz, Haas, & Gurevitch, 1973).

The fulfillment of cognitive needs was strengthened further as participants described learning normative behaviors through interactions with upper-class students. These veteran students provided information and advice about buying and selling books, signing up for orientation, and joining clubs. Participants paid attention to these posts because they were from “experienced” upper-level students. Kelly felt the information from these students was helpful because she knew “they had already been through it” and trusted the perspective they provided. Information acquired through Facebook stalking and interacting with upper-class students gave insight into normal student behavior, assisting incoming students as they developed an awareness of their new community. The knowledge gained through the acquisition of social norms satisfies four of the elements of UG theory, cognitive, affective, personal integrative and social needs (Katz, Haas, & Gurevitch, 1973).

Community Development

Each participant identified community and establishing connections as reasons for using the ‘Class of’ page. Molly indicated, “I wanted to learn more about clubs and the things you could do here. Because now I’m part of the [RMI] student radio page and the [club] page.” Sally mentioned learning about clubs and organizations through the page and actively looked for them when she arrived on

campus. The “Class of” page provided participants the ability to make connections with others and develop a sense of belonging to the larger university community. We identify these connections as meeting the social needs defined by UG theory.

Focus group participants found continued support from connections made on the "Class of" page. Anna highlighted,

Yeah, we found Roger because he went to ... the same meet-ups we did and then the first few days when [Anna's friend] had to leave for the [leadership class] ... retreat and I'm not part of [the leadership class] and I was by myself ... I found either Roger or someone else that we had met ... so I wasn't by myself that first weekend.

As a result of Anna's participation on the page, she obtained social support through her transition to the RMI community.

Sally indicated individuals with the same major messaged her and now they study together for tests:

There were people from my major who had messaged me because my major was kind of small ... they were like hey we have the same major and now I study with them for every test ... [the page] kind of helps with meeting other people in your major at least and having a study group or finding people in the same classes as you.

The page allowed Sally to make acquaintances and identify her academic community before classes started. Both Anna and Sally's experience align with the UG theory's personal integrative need category. Their experiences allowed them to strengthen their personal status and iden-

tity, gaining confidence as they transitioned into their new academic community.

Participants indicated they would encourage future students to use the "Class of" Facebook page to learn about the campus community. Molly stated, "...it was an easy way...to get to know people...because it was like hey you are on my page....just the common interest in that they were going to [RMI]." These connections allowed students to feel like they belonged and were members of the community they had chosen. Students benefitted as they developed a community of peers, and engaged in academics, extracurricular and social activities on the "Class of" page.

Discussion and Implications

UG theory was used to organize and further our understanding of the needs that were met for the students using the "Class of" page. Students perceive creating a sense of community with their new institution as the primary benefit of the "Class of" page. This happens before the matriculation process, facilitated through a series of behaviors including information seeking and relationship development. Students use the information gathered to explore and identify normative behaviors of the campus community. These behaviors assist students in identifying their place at the institution and areas of similarity with fellow classmates. This culminated in providing students a sense of belonging at their new institution. These findings have implications for how institutions can approach "Class of" pages in order to benefit their students. We will present implications including opportunities for maintaining established relationships, institutions' e-communication plan applications, and continued community connections.

Participants reported that they did not maintain relationships developed on the “Class of” page once classes started; as a result, their use of the page significantly decreased. Kelly said she stopped viewing it and Molly agreed that she would visit only to clear notifications. This leaves potential for institutions to provide greater benefit to their students by offering entertainment and an opportunity to maintain relationships. Creating contests, campus storylines, or pictures for students to follow or participate in could provide entertainment. Encouraging extended interactions on the page could assist students in maintaining relationships during and after their matriculation at college.

Our findings suggest students are using “Class of” pages to meet four of the five needs predicted by UG theory: social needs by establishing new friendships, cognitive needs by seeking and sharing information, affective needs by finding commonalities with new peers, and personal integrative needs by maintaining one’s personal status and identity. The remaining need, tension release did not appear in the data analysis. This could be attributed to the type of information students gained on the “Class of” page: participants sought relevant facts and information for their transition to the university, not entertainment. This presents an opportunity for institutions interested in having students continue to visit their “Class of” page for the reasons mentioned above and to help encourage positive normative behaviors. If webmasters can develop creative ways for their pages to help release the healthy tension associated with first year coursework, perhaps with games or competitions, students may continue visiting the site throughout the fall and spring terms.

The transition to college is filled with information, deadlines, and questions. Institutions spend time, money, and resources on marketing materials created to present information and assist students during the matriculation process. This information, communicated by mail and email, matches the institutions' timeline for students, however, our participants found that information presented in less formal ways and delivered in a “just in time” manner was more helpful. “Class of” pages can be part of an institutions' e-communication plan delivering information throughout the transition process. Relevant questions, comments, and posts can be provided with little cost and the potential to effectively reach more people. Institutions could hire upper-class students to provide information and perspectives on the institution and the campus community.

Participants discussed a desire for more meet-up opportunities and information about off-campus activities and the surrounding community. Addressing these concerns on “Class of” pages could increase activity on the site throughout the semester by providing information, such as job opportunities, service projects, and community events. Additional activities that include options for off-campus experiences could enhance a student's sense of belonging to the university community and the surrounding neighborhood.

“Class of” Facebook pages have the potential to benefit both incoming students and institutions if used productively. Students in this study perceived the pages to be beneficial as they sought information, learned normative behaviors, and explored their new community. Professional staff should be aware of the potential “Class of”

Facebook pages have in fulfilling these needs and actively work to improve institutional presence in this forum. Student affairs practitioners may find the information shared, explored, and saved within the “Class of” pages a helpful resource in planning for student services, and engagement opportunities. The pages include accurate and timely information regarding the character traits, interests, and concerns of their incoming students. Monitoring the page for ideas for extracurricular activities, specific student needs, and areas of concern could supplement a unit’s evaluative measures. Proper maintenance of “Class of” pages, inclusive of pertinent information for students throughout their collegiate experience, could encourage continued engagement with the institution. This could ultimately result in alumni relation departments using the networking capabilities of Facebook to track students following graduation and keep alumni engaged with institutional activities.

Researchers interested in further understanding how undergraduate students perceive “Class of” pages may find that institutional type and size plays a role in how individuals use these resources. Recently admitted students, especially those attending out-of-state, understandably want to feel connected to their new communities. It is plausible that the type and amount of information users want from these pages is related to these characteristics. We also suggest that future research draw on theories from sociology, social psychology, and mental wellness to explore students’ perceptions of these resources. Facebook’s growing use of target marketing could also prove fruitful to institutions and researchers collecting data on student interests and desires. By tracking the

specific institutionally developed advertisements that students ‘click’ on, we should gain a much better sense for the type of information and experiences students are seeking once on campus. Facebook is changing, and new technologies will continue to emerge as students adapt and become active on these sites. Institutions must be aware of and proactive in these adaptations in order to engage and serve their students.

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