by Grant Greenwood

Vimeo

LinkedIn

YouTube

Twitter

Pinterest

Facebook

Examining the Presence of Social Media

on University Web Sites

Introduction

Over the past few years, social networking has exploded into a massive medium that has captured the attention of a large portion of the American population. The ever-growing social networking site(s) (SNS) movement has filled a networking gap and thus, has presented higher education institutions with unique opportunities (Reid 2009) to further connect with a target market that is familiar with and frequently using social media. With such a widely-used and relatively cheap medium on the rise, universities have begun to harness SNS to bolster recruiting and marketing efforts. This study records and analyzes these efforts, documenting which universities are using SNS and how.

Literary Analysis

A typical university undergraduate recruit is a high school student between the ages of 14 and 19. This age group, known as "digital natives," is immersed in and exposed to technology, the Internet and social media often and at an early age (Liang 2010). This study was constructed with the assumption that most four-year degree-granting institutions are largely targeting these "digital natives." In two recent studies, The Pew Internet and American Life Project (Lenhart et al. 2011, Madden and Zickuhr 2011) found that 82 percent of teenagers between the ages of 14 and 17 and 83 percent of adults between the ages of 18 and 29 use at least one SNS. More specifically, 52 percent of Facebook users, 33 percent of Twitter users, and six percent of LinkedIn users engage daily. With this data in mind, Boyd and Ellison's (2008) definition of SNS is adopted by this study to govern content analysis of college Web sites and homepages. A social networking site is a Web-based service that allows individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. This study also will routinely reference "name brand" SNS, such as Facebook, Twitter, Linkedin, and Foursquare along with less populated sites, such as Tumblr, Gowalla and Scribd. Sites such as YouTube and Vimeo and even software such as iTunes, not traditionally thought of as social media, are also included. Understandably, there may be opposition to the inclusion of these sites and programs in this study; however, each of these sites clearly has one or more social media aspects.

The Internet age and social media have revolutionized the way universities are recruiting students (Merrill 2010). An institution's Web site is a direct extension of the campus and prospective students are using these sites to select their future colleges (Schimmel et al. 2010). Furthermore, the majority of university Web page traffic is derived from either prospective students or current students. According to Meyer (2008), 34.4 percent of university homepage users are either future students or current students. When the massive numbers of 14-year-olds to 24-year-olds visiting college Web pages and the amount using at least one SNS are considered, it is unsurprising that institutions of higher learning are now beginning to merge the two.

This study also seeks to analyze this merger and how effectively institutions are implementing and showcasing their SNS. Prospective students are visiting a Web page for the main reason of locating content (Poock and Lefond 2001). If the content desired happens to be social media, institutions will find it advantageous to make this information easily and more importantly, quickly accessible. According to Weinriech and Obendorf (2008), 77 percent of all page visits last less than 10 seconds. Thus, presenting social media on the homepage is the most effective way to reach users in this time frame. Additionally, Neilson (2006, 2010) suggests that only 23 percent of individuals use the scroll bars on a homepage to read text, making the space above the fold the most valuable real estate. Along with content, ease of navigation is also highly valued by teens and young adults visiting university Web pages. Poock and Lefond (2001) find that these individuals expect to find desired information within three mouse clicks. These studies imply that a university's social media information and SNS should be located on the homepage, towards the top, viewable without the use of scrollbars, or at the very maximum, within three mouse clicks from the homepage.

Methodology

The *U.S. News, 2010-2011 Best Colleges: National Rankings* (*U.S. News* 2011) is the source for the subjects used in this study. While the publication ranks extend to the top 191 colleges, only the top 100 institutions listed are included in the sample. The constituents vary in size, location and discipline emphasis, but all are four-year, degree-granting institutions offering a full

range of undergraduate majors, master's and doctoral degrees. Differentiation among the sample provided this study with a broad data range.

Over a five-day period in early August, 2011, each of the 100 colleges' Web sites was visited to obtain data for this study. Upon entering a college's site, a full screen shot of the homepage was captured and the site was searched for SNS links.

College Web sites were first reviewed for SNS utilized. Each college was given credit for incorporating a particular SNS if there was text or a picture anywhere on the site linking the user to the college's respective SNS page. To uncover all possible links, the homepage, along with site pages dedicated to general information, prospective students and current students were explored. Additionally, the phrases "social media" and "social networking" were entered into each site's search box. This search was performed for two reasons, (1) to reveal any SNS links that may have not been uncovered through site browsing and (2) to uncover and record which colleges had pages specifically used for social media. If a search yielded a specific social media page, that page was backtracked to the homepage and mouse clicks taken to reach the page were recorded. On numerous university sites, various organizations and student groups had their own SNS linked. These examples are not counted in the data range, as the social media does not pertain to the university as a whole. Only "official" social media pages were considered.

For many prospective students, the homepage is their first glimpse of the college. Therefore, to build a full understanding of how colleges are using social media to reach these students, an important differentiation between each college's total social media used and social media present on the homepage was made. To accurately record this distinction, homepages were reviewed a second time by means of the previously captured screenshots. The screenshots were taken in an attempt to combat inaccuracy. Web sites are prone to change and the screenshots ensured that the researcher was analyzing the same homepage used in the first portion of the study. A separate data range was

then constructed to record social media links available to the user via the homepage and whether or not links present could be viewed without the use of scrollbars. In this analysis, the same guidelines for SNS utilized governed the study.

Findings and Results

A variety of social media sites were found. The most frequent were Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, iTunes, Flicker, Linkedin, and Foursquare. Additionally, a data series labeled "other" was included to encompass other less-used SNS. SNS falling under the "other" classification include Tumblr, Gowalla, Vimeo, and Scribd. To provide the most clarity for this study, the data was organized under four separate classifications; all colleges, colleges utilizing SNS, colleges linking SNS on the homepage, and colleges allocating an entire page to social media.

All Colleges

Overall, 92 percent of colleges were using social media in conjunction with their official Web sites with an average of 3.7 SNS per college and a standard deviation of 1.59. While there was a broad spectrum of SNS linked per college, the minimum used was zero (eight colleges) and the maximum was seven (one college).

Colleges Utilizing at Least One SNS

To provide further insight on how colleges are using SNS, the 92 percent of colleges linking at least one SNS was isolated from the total sample for further analysis. Percentages in the following tables were calculated by using a denominator of 92. Table 1 shows the number of SNS colleges are linking and Table 2 depicts the breakdown of these links.

Table 1. Number of SNS Linked by Colleges

# of SNS Linked	# of Colleges	%
1	1	1.1
2	9	9.8
3	18	19.6
4	38	41.3
5	13	14.1
6	12	13
7	1	1.1

Additionally, Neilson (2006, 2010) suggests that only 23 percent of individuals use the scroll bars on a homepage to read text, making the space above the fold the most valuable real estate.

Table 2. Spread of SNS Linked

SNS	# of Colleges Linking	%
Facebook	91	98.9
Twitter	88	95.7
YouTube	79	85.9
iTunes	47	51.1
Flicker	31	33.7
Linkedin	18	19.6
Foursquare	9	9.8
Other	6	6.5

Evident in Table 1, the most frequented number of sites used per college was four. Perhaps most interesting was that nearly 70 percent of colleges linking social media linked to at least four sites. Facebook was the clear leader of college social media. Of the 92 schools referencing their SNS, 99 percent of them made their Facebook pages available to their Web site users. There was only one institution utilizing social media that did not have a link to its Facebook page. Twitter was a close second behind Facebook, with 96 percent of the colleges using social media linking to their Twitter page. YouTube is also a fairly popular medium, with 86 percent of institutions linking. These three social media sites comprise the large majority with a substantial drop off to the next most utilized SNS. At a representation of 51 percent, iTunes is the fourth most popular networking site. Following iTunes, Flicker recorded at 34 percent, Linkedin at 20 percent, Foursquare at 10 percent, and all other sites comprising the bottom seven percent of colleges linking.

Colleges Linking SNS on Homepage

Of the 100 colleges in this study, 77 provided a link to at least one of their SNS on their homepages. Coincidentally, 285 out of the 369 links, or 77 percent of the total SNS links, uncovered in this study were found on the homepages of the sample. Documented in Table 3 are the social media links colleges are including on their homepage. Out of these 77 institutions, 19 placed these links below the fold requiring a vertical scrollbar to locate. The following percentages are calculated using a denominator of 77 (colleges linking SNS on the homepage).

Table 3. Spread of SNS Linked on Homepage

SNS	# of Colleges Linking	% of Colleges Using SNS on Homepage
Facebook	76	98.7
Twitter	73	94.8
YouTube	66	85.7
iTunes	36	46.8
Flicker	21	27.3
Linkedin	6	7.8
Foursquare	5	6.5
Other	2	2.6

Table 3 reveals a significant trend among universities. The large majority of these institutions were providing Facebook, Twitter and YouTube links on their homepages. After these three most popular sites, there was a huge drop to iTunes and an even bigger drop to the remaining SNS.

Colleges Allocating an Entire Page to Social Media

In this study, 35 colleges were found to be dedicating a separate Web page to social media. Out of this group, 24 also provided links to their social media on the homepage. Table 4 captures the spread of mouse clicks needed to reach these pages.

Table 4. Number of Clicks Needed to Reach Social Media Pages

# of Mouse Clicks	# of Colleges	%
1	21	60
2	9	25.7
3	3	8.6
4	1	2.9

The average number of clicks needed to reach the devoted SNS page was 1.5 with a standard deviation of .79. For the 21 colleges requiring only one mouse click, a link to their social media pages was present on their homepages.

Discussion

With such a large percentage of prospective students using social media in some capacity, colleges clearly must adapt their recruiting techniques to this generation. Ninety-two percent of colleges use SNS in conjunction with their own sites. Institutions not taking advantage of the free SNS available are not only missing out on marketing and recruiting opportunities, but are lagging behind their competitors. Some of the institutions encompassed in the remaining eight percent may indeed use social media, but elect to omit links to these sites on the official university Web page. This omission still puts them behind competing institutions, because their SNS are accessed at the expense of time, logging on to a specific SNS and searching within the SNS to connect with the university. With such ample space on any given Web site, adding a simple link is an easy way to increase the contact opportunities with prospective students. Furthermore, containing these links in the top of the homepage, the

most trafficked page of the institution, significantly increases the likelihood that a prospect will connect with the college via a SNS (Nielson 2010). With 77 percent of colleges incorporating SNS on their homepage, any college opting not to do so is, again, forfeiting a competitive edge to their peers.

While not the majority, 35 of the colleges studied chose to provide users with a specific page on their Web sites to inform them of the college's SNS. The specific SNS pages were only useful if they could be located within one click from the homepage. While many colleges using this page met Poock and Lefond's (2001) criteria of three or fewer mouse clicks, the page was often difficult to locate. These pages were first searched for by browsing. This search often took multiple redirections from the homepage into subsequent content pages and careful review of these pages to ensure any links to the SNS page were not overlooked. Once the dedicated SNS page was finally found, the search was then backtracked to the homepage to determine the minimum amount of mouse clicks needed. So even though most institutions are adhering to Poock and Lefond's (2001) guidelines, uncertainty of the page's location ended up negating the advantaged gained from having the specific site in the first place. Conversely, colleges linking their alternative SNS pages on their homepages provided their prospective students with an extremely easy and efficient way to connect with the school and ultimately making the likelihood of matriculation higher.

This study found that colleges using social media in tandem with their sites averaged roughly four SNS per college. The sites chosen were most often Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and iTunes. At the very minimum, institutions should have a presence on these four sites and provide prospective students with access to these pages from their Web sites, preferably on the homepages. With social media continuing to gain popularity, more and more SNS are surfacing. Forrester Research analyst Charlene Li (2008) suggests that in the near future SNS will "…be like air… they will be anywhere and everywhere we need and want them to be." Social media is a generational shift and anyone and everyone is adopting the phenomenon. As the social media movement matures, colleges must decide which of these new SNS, in addition to those already adopted by the majority of universities, are advantageous to implement in their recruiting and marketing techniques. Prospective students are using these sites and have come to expect them in the recruiting process (M.E. 2011) and as a result, universities must be willing to adapt their efforts to satisfy these expectations (Daily, et al. 2006).

Future Studies
This study was constructed with the typical first-time freshmen in mind; however, a large portion of many colleges' student body is composed of transfer students, some of whom are older than typical high school graduates. This study may be retooled in the future to detect the SNS preference of colleges consisting largely of non-traditional students.

Finally, this study only uses a handful of Web page design elements in analyzing the effectiveness of a university's social media placement and usage on their site. Further review of the links and how they are presented to the user may enhance this study's findings.

GRANT GREENWOOD is an admissions counselor at Hardin-Simmons University (TX). He earned his bachelor's degree in Business Administration with an emphasis in Economics from HSU and is currently working towards his MBA. His research interests include evaluating higher education administration and improving university efficiency.

REFERENCES

Daily, Lynn, Murphy Anderson, Cristina Ingenito, David Duffy, Paul Krimm, and Scott Thomson. "Understanding MBA Consumer Needs and the Development of Marketing Strategy." *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education* 16, no. 1 (2006): 143-158.

Lenhart, Amanda, Kristen Purcell, Aaron Smith, and Kathryn Zickuhr. "*Social Media and Mobile Internet Use Among Teens and Young Adults.*" 3 Feb. 2010. http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Social-Media-and-Young-Adults.aspx (accessed Sept. 15, 2011).

Li, Charlene. "*The future of social networks: Social networks will be like air.*" 6 Mar. 2008. http://forrester.typepad.com/groundswell/2008/03/the-future-of-s.html (accessed Oct. 5, 2011).

Liang, Belle, Meghan Commins, and Nicole Duffy. "Using Social Media to Engage Youth: Education, Social Justice, & Humanitarianism." *Prevention Researcher* 17, no. 5 (2010): 13-16.

Madden, Mary and Kathryn Zickuhr. "*65% of Online Adults Use Social Media.*" 26 Aug. 2011. http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Social-Networking-Sites.aspx (accessed Sept. 15, 2011).

M.E.. "Class of 2015 and Social Media: Admissions Takeaways." *University Business*, June 2011, 18-18.

Merrill, Nicole. "*Social Media in International Student Recruiting and Outreach Survey.*" Feb. 2010. http://www.globalcampus.com/external/Survey_GC_Final.pdf (accessed Oct. 10, 2011).

Meyer, Katrina A. "The "Virtual Face" of Institutions: What Do Home Pages Reveal About Higher Education." *Innovative Higher Education* 33, no. 3 (2008): 141-157.

Nelson, Jakob. Interview by Matt Mickiewicz. *Interview with Jakob Nielson.* SitePoint Pty. Ltd., 19 July 2006.

Nielson, Jakob. "*Scrolling and Attention.*" 22 Mar. 2010. http://www.useit.com/alertbox/scrolling-attention.html (accessed Sept. 7, 2011).

Poock, M.C. and D. Lefond. "How college-bound prospects perceive university Web sites: findings, implications, and turning browser into applicants." *C&U Journal 77,* no. 1 (2001): 15-21.

Reid, Ken. "The Rise of Social Networking Sites." *Education Journal* no. 119 (2009): 22-22.

Schimmel, Kurt, Darlene Motley, Stanko Racic, Gayle Marco, and Mark Eschenfelder. "The importance of university Web pages in selecting a higher education institution." *Research in Higher Education Journal* 9, (2010): 1-16.

"*U.S. News: National University Rankings.*" n.d. http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/rankings/national-universities (accessed Aug. 5, 2011).

Weinreich, Harald and Hartmut Obendorf. "Not Quite the Average: An Empirical Study of Web Use." *ACM Transactions on the Web 2*, no. 1 (2008): Article #5.