

Social Network Sites (SNSs) Marketing Strategies In An Unconventional Context: Using The Bsns Index To Evaluate Adoption And Use By Higher Education Institutions

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Over the past decade, the adoption and use of social network sites (SNSs) has skyrocketed.

Boyd and Ellison (2007) define the term social network sites (SNSs) as:

Web-based services that allow 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. (p. 211).

Recent reports indicate that Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, and LinkedIn are currently among the most popular and widely used SNSs (Hitz & Blackburn, 2017). According to Pew Research Center (2017), 69% of adults in the United States used at least one SNS in 2016. This is a significant increase from the mere 5% in 2005 (Pew Research Center, 2017). In the U.S. alone, SNS users average over two hours each day on a social network platform (Hitz & Blackburn, 2017).

Several researchers have devoted considerable attention to analyzing the relationship between in-class SNS use and student learning outcomes in higher education (Cao, Ajjan, & Hong, 2013; Park, Cha, Lim, & Jung, 2014). In addition, there is substantial research on faculty member and student attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of SNS use in an educational context (Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, & Witty, 2010; Sadowski, Pediatiss, & Townsend, 2017). Despite the advancements that have been made in the existing literature, there is little research that evaluates the use of SNSs from a marketing strategy perspective for higher education institutions.

As of 2014, there are over 4,600 higher education institutions across the nation, looking to attract and retain students (Statista, 2016). Paired with the increased number of shoppers that conduct research on an online platform before making a purchase (81%) (Morrison, 2014), these two considerations make the industry a highly competitive environment. Given the societal shifts in information search, higher education institutions can no longer solely rely on traditional media to reach their audiences. The use of SNSs as a marketing communication strategy not only sets higher education institutions apart from each other, but allows them to reach an audience size that was once not imaginable, nor possible. With the number of SNS users globally expected to rise to almost 3 billion by 2020 (Hitz & Blackburn, 2017), higher education institutions must adopt and use SNSs to survive and thrive in this digital age.

This research seeks to employ the Business Social Network Site (BSNS) Index established by Peters and Salazar (2010) to evaluate higher education institution adoption and use of SNSs as a marketing communication strategy. Gaining an understanding of SNS adoption levels by higher education institutions may glean insight into ways these institutions can engage the new digitally connected consumer. We will evaluate levels of SNSs adoption and use, while identifying how higher education institutions can best focus their marketing efforts.

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