

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

EXPLORING HOW SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING PRACTICES
IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE ACADEMIC PROGRAMS
SHAPE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the Doctor of Education Degree in Educational Leadership

by

Reut Cohen

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The Dissertation of Reut Cohen is approved:

Linda Bowen, M.A.

Date

Miguel Ceja, Ph.D.

Date

Robert Hill, Ed.D.

Date

Nathan R. Durdella, Ph.D., Committee Chair

Date

California State University, Northridge

Dedication

My educational path could never have been possible without the incredible strength of my grandparents and parents, refugees and the children of refugees from Iraq, Syria, North Africa, and Ethiopia who left everything they knew for a new land, Israel, and raised their families there, but never had the opportunities to seek out higher education in a fledgling country marked by rationing and poverty. My work is dedicated to them, as I exemplify the lessons that they taught me about perseverance, strength, and honor, which are derived from a rich cultural background. I am proud of that background and embrace it wholeheartedly. There is something communal about the success of a proud Brown and Mizrahi (Middle Eastern) Jewish woman who achieves her educational goals and leaves an indelible mark on society's most underserved.

The late Kobe Bryant lived by the mantra: "Rest at the end, not in the middle." He subscribed to this advice, given to him by an inspirational high school English teacher, and actualized it in everything he did. As someone who grew up with a fair share of struggle and had to step up before I was ready, I always sought to persevere and never give up. The culmination of my studies and this dissertation is dedicated to those who don't quit, no matter how hard things are.

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over my head and purrs supportively as he watches me type away. Emily Brontë is credited with writing: “A cat is an animal which has more human feelings than almost any other.”

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I would like to recognize my parents, Ruth and Avner Cohen, for their unwavering love and encouragement that allowed me to reach this point in my academic and professional career.

As the daughter of blue-collar workers who never had a chance to go to school, I must note that this monumental educational accomplishment also belongs to my parents. What I lacked in material wealth, I had abundantly in character, thanks to the example set by my parents. I'd also like to acknowledge Alan and Sarah Schorr, my in-laws, for their interest in my work and studies. Lastly, I'd like to especially thank my husband, Eric Schorr, who I know will celebrate this achievement with me is a source of tremendous encouragement as I continue to seek to be a positive agent of change in my discipline. I love you all.

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ABSTRACT

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Reut Cohen

Doctoral Candidate of Education Degree
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This study sought to explore how social media marketing practices have the potential to impact student engagement, which is linked to student success, at the community college level. The research leveraged 16 interviews with student participants within a community college from a specific academic program that has shown increased enrollment numbers and utilizes social media as a tool in the promotion of student work and aids in engagement of students. The study utilized a grounded theory research approach, as student experiences are particularly helpful in addressing the gap in knowledge about how today's community college students understand feelings of "belonging" within a program. Ultimately, this research study allowed for a focus on group characteristics and patterns in how students reported feeling of belonging and success within their media program of study. While emerging research shows that social media is also a hot-button issue, community colleges are behind the curve when it comes to understanding how

this tool can potentially be used far beyond mere marketing but can be used by faculty and staff for greater sense of community, student belonging, and, potentially, student success.

The two research questions that guided this research focused on how community colleges currently use their official social media to connect with students and prospective students, and, critically, how social media practices of community colleges shape student engagement and success. The study's findings indicate that social media channels managed officially on the part of Oak Tree Community College are not used particularly well, with the bulk of student participants explaining that for them to follow these pages actively – or at all – they want to see themselves reflected and want current information. Participants described how they engage with non-official social media pages run by departments and programs, but virtually all participants explained that they are less inclined to closely follow the official page of the college. To better utilize official social media channels, community colleges should take into account that students need to feel engaged in content shared; that is, student participants require that they are reflected in the posts and information shared, and explained that they desire regular postings that present current, updated information.

Ultimately, student participants helped to determine that social media is an effective tool to motivate and engage students, both of which help students to succeed academically and professionally, when students see that they are reflected in posts. Student participants described the important of social media usage in the everyday lives, and described their expectation that it be used in higher education because of the widespread and common use of it in everyday life. In the course of interviews with student participants, it became clear that social media usage was tied to student participants' identities. According to participants, the media department in this study used social media effectively to support the participants by helping them to feel more

engaged, describing the motivation they found in seeing their work shared, and explaining how they felt validated by seeing themselves reflected in the department's social media postings.

The study's findings suggest that faculty and staff in higher education settings can use social media to directly engage with students, though it is recommended that the impact of social media platforms in higher education should be further explored with more research that includes larger numbers of participants, as this case study showed students benefitted from departmental social media usage. An exploration of social media usage following March 2020, when many public institutions moved to remote/virtual instruction, is also recommended to understand how colleges and universities adapted by tapping into emerging technologies and the efficacy of using these technologies to help students feel supported and engaged during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter I

Introduction

How does social media usage in community college academic programs shape student engagement? This study seeks to address exactly that phenomenon in an age where social media usage has become commonplace and a critical facet of identity for today's college students.

What started as an interest regarding community colleges' marketing techniques in a broad sense narrowed to a specific focus on how colleges leverage social media marketing practices, which utilize the four major platforms – Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat and Twitter – to reach various college students and potential students. Taken a step further, beyond merely reaching an audience, these platforms can impact student engagement in the sense that a student who feels like they are a part of a program or integral to the campus through social media is more likely to engage within the campus – and perhaps more likely to complete their studies and perform well as a result of that psychological dynamic of feeling involved and important (Zywica & Danowski, 2008; Yao & Zhong, 2014).

The research on social media marketing at college level is scarce, while the research on student engagement in departments that use social media is nearly non-existent and slowly emerging. That is in part because of the lack of urgency in loosely coupled systems (Weick, 1976) such as community colleges where change occurs almost imperceptibly because of the slow nature of it and an overall lack of urgency to implement change. However, it is worth exploring on the part of educators, administrators, and higher learning stakeholders. In short, as illustrated in this research study's literature review, students maintain a sense of belonging within their institutions through proactive social media use at department or college-level programming levels (Arnold & Paulus, 2010; Sutherland, Davis, Terton, & Visser, 2018).

In March 2020, a game-changing event for higher education occurred, with virtually all U.S. public, and private, institutions shifting to an online learning model (Redden, 2020). Due to the nature of a global pandemic, departments across higher education institutions found that they needed to adapt to new realities and to encourage students, with social media being one potential vehicle for this kind of support and encouragement. Indeed, emerging research shows that social media is also a hot-button issue even prior to COVID-19 potentially shifting the public to a “new normal” (Stiepan, 2020; Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2016), the *wild wild west* of marketing, with a plethora of research on consumer psychology (McCorkindale, DiStaso, & Sisco, 2013; Shade, Kornfield, & Oliver, 2015). It is also an area of strategizing that needs to be at the forefront of profit and non-profit higher education institutions alike, and an area of research that can benefit two-year institutions that are looking to find ways to engage students and potentially help in retention and completion within various programs (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009; Moran, Seaman, & Tinti-Kane, 2011; Munoz & Wood, 2015; Quinton & Simkin, 2016; Raza, Qazi, & Umer, 2016).

In the past, colleges and universities were hyper-focused on traditional modes of marketing, like word-of-mouth, fliers, local ads, community outreach, and so on (Gibbs and Knapp, 2002). Incorporating strategic social media marketing planning in higher education appears to be an uphill battle for many institutions (Oliveira & Figueira, 2015) where change occurs at a slower pace than in the private sector (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002; Weick, 1976).

In higher education settings, social media is rarely seen as a potential resource, and there are just a few research examples to date of any social media platform used as a pedagogical tool (Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007; Rinaldo, Tapp, & Laverie, 2011; Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2011) but no real examples of how it shapes student engagement. Only in the last few years has

there been a slow realization that social media is not a mere spectator sport, just something to idly observe, but has positive benefits for students when applied in higher education settings in marketing and promotion of institutions (Kane, Alavi, Labianca, & Borgatti, 2014; Hou & Macnamara, 2017). Those benefits can deal specifically with students' feelings of engagement within their institution (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009), which early research has linked with overall student success and positive outcomes that lead to commencement and career success (Vygotsky, 1962).

Social media is a major component of any marketing strategy for small and big businesses alike, with companies focusing on best practices for user engagement and brand visibility (Krishen, Berezan, Agarwal, & Kachroo, 2016). Universities have followed suit, investing in social marketing communications over recent years (Kolowich, 2015), but there appears to be a huge blind spot where two-year colleges are concerned. As discussed in the literature review in more depth, community colleges are at a disadvantage financially (Rose, 2010) and departments operate independently of one another in a way that is not always conducive to good social media marketing (Kezar, 2001; Oliveira & Figueira, 2015).

For years, the way that community colleges have used channels like Facebook and Twitter, now ubiquitous marketing mediums, has been generally understudied and relatively ignored by academia. In the last two years, new research has emerged that ties the need for better and more robust social media to help with student success. Yet the body of research is still quite slim despite the general growth of social media more broadly. In fact, in the most basic sense, social media is important, as made evident by the way which people's ideas are shaped by social media, according to research that demonstrates the social capital behind social media (Rowley, 2008; Raza, Qazi, & Umer, 2016). From shopping to politics, digital media marketing

is here to stay and have quite the impact (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009). Today's public finds out and learn about products, events, rallies, and even political candidates by way of social media. To be effective, college communications departments must create compelling and engaging content where the audience is spending its most time. Instagram, for example, appears to be a platform of interest for community colleges' social media strategy (Kolowich, 2015).

In fact, over the last two years, schools like the University of Southern California have been handing over cell phones to students in order for them to share experiences on official social media channels (USC, n.d.). With millennial social media use so widespread (Pew Research Center, 2018) and an emerging generation of 18-year-olds, those born after the year 2000 who are known as centennials, are the truest technological natives the world has ever seen (Tysjac, 2017), universities have to be actively present on social media technologies (Mbodila, Ndebele, & Muhandji, 2014). It is simply where the future lies – and the future is now in that a majority of students are present and active on social media channels (Goode & Woodward, 2016; Van den Bergh & Behrer, 2016).

Research Problem: Overlooking Social Media at Two-Year Colleges

As a result of this rapid integration of technology, social media best practices are on the minds of many public information officers who want to leverage technology to help attract new students (Melchiorre, 2017). It makes the issue a significant one to study, with implications for community college marketing. Yet, it is not studied enough, and social media is underutilized despite its relatively low-cost return on investment (Berger & Wild, 2016; Hou & Macnamara, 2017; Assimakopoulos, Antoniadis, Kayas, & Dvizac, 2017). What we know from current research and practice is that there is a lack of scholarly focus on the potential link between social media usage at academic program levels and student engagement, which makes this research

study's purpose one that explores that impact and provide stakeholders with a better understanding of the way that social media can be used at the community college level.

One example of the lack of social media use can be observed at Oak Tree Community College (a pseudonym) – the site of this study – located in Los Angeles County, which emphasizes a missed opportunity to recruit and engage students. In July 2017, Associate Professor of Biology Kelly Perez, a pseudonym, took her students to a major biology conference to present the work they conducted over the summer. For the first time, the college won. It was a very rare win for any college – the first time that a two-year institution took home such a prize. But there was no mention of it anywhere on social media by the college. Hypothetically, this kind of information might persuade potential biology or science majors to want to attend Oak Tree Community College. With the exception of the campus newspaper, there was no social media promotion of the college (and students') success, nor was there a campus-wide email, main page banner, or anything else to indicate the college has faculty that can take their students to high-level competitions – and win.

The literature review on this topic makes it clear that many community colleges have a similar blind spot regarding social media. This is also evident from a lack of a schedule for posting, no real engagement with faculty on social media on the part of most two-year schools, and an overall “afterthought” mentality displayed on the part of marketing divisions at colleges where social media is concerned (Hou & Macnamara, 2017). Indeed, there are many gaps in knowledge and practice where new media is concerned, and the majority of research comes from outside social media marketing at college or university levels – focused more on business and psychology (Kavada, 2012; Marwick, 2013; Tuten & Solomon, 2015). This study seeks to

examine existing research, learn from it, and explore how social media can be used at academic program levels to help students feel engaged and potentially aid in their success.

A critical examination of the strategies that colleges are using today is useful for understanding where potential limitations are and what has been done already with respect to social media usage at department levels within the institution. That is because research on social media marketing is readily available but usually applies to Fortune 500 companies rather than non-profit or educational interests. Furthermore, it is no secret that at the community college, “rapid or large-scale change [is] difficult” (Kezar, 72). Since social media is so new, its adoption will arguably take time.

Furthermore, it is crucial to note that two-year colleges are arguably at an economic disadvantage (Rose, 2005). In terms of funding, colleges are reliant on enrollment for funding (Bailey et al., 2015). With attendance at four-year institutions incentivized over two-year colleges, overall enrollment is down in the nation’s junior colleges (Guzman-Lopez, 2017). Following the Great Recession, enrollment rates at two-year institutions grew, but graduation rates fell (Dunbar et al., 2011). Ultimately, two-year colleges need to recruit better and engage students more, or they could risk losing students (Sutherland, Davis, Terton, & Visser, 2018). That could mean tapping into business tactics that work to help people feel engaged (McCorkindale, T., DiStaso, M., & Sisco, H. (2013). Social media may be part of the strategy and needs to be understood from a college context in order to change the way it is currently used by the majority of two-year institutions. Social media usage at college departmental levels has a potential for increasing student success and departmental reputation and should not be overlooked.

Research Purpose: Relationship Between Social Media and Student Engagement

Due to the aforementioned significant drops in enrollment, colleges are looking for new ways to attract students (Guzman-Lopez, 2017) and one of those ways is by better utilizing social media, which is in the hands of nearly all college students (Sutherland, Davis, Terton, & Visser, 2018). Yet marketing plans appear to be vague at the college level, due in part to funding and also due to the “loosely coupled” nature of most college marketing divisions from departments that would benefit most from a marketing strategy (Weick, 1976, p. 4). Moreover, it is important to note and acknowledge that change takes time in the public sphere (Kezar, 2001). It is an incremental process in the best of circumstances when everyone is on the same page. A lot of the time, the desired change is not defined – or conveyed – properly. Thus, this study focuses on the impacts of social media on student engagement within an academic program, exploring associations between social media and student engagement.

Beyond the shifting mediums and functionalities on platforms, many colleges rarely appear to have a robust social media strategy. Private schools, like the University of Southern California, invest in social media (USC. (n.d.)). Yet, as stated above, colleges are arguably at an economic disadvantage, due to funding limitations and overall pushback against two-year colleges due to a perceived lack of student success (Bailey et al., 2015).

Research Questions

Overall questions that help to shape research questions center on two main areas – 1.) understanding social media strategies at community colleges and 2.) understanding student engagement with social media use by academic programs. Specifically, questions focus on how social media is viewed at the community college as it relates to connecting with current and

potential students, and a grounded theory case analysis research approach seeks to answer both questions.

The first research question seeks to focus qualitatively on understanding what social media strategies are being used by leveraging interviewing with student participants who were impacted by those strategies. The ensuing research question is: How do community colleges currently utilize their official social media to connect with students and potential students?

The second research question emphasizes the way that social media practices at a departmental level can impact student engagement, a concept that is thoroughly defined in the literature review section. The research question that derives from this phenomenon is: How do social media practices of community colleges shape student engagement and potential success within the institution?

Theory: Lev Vygotsky's Concept of Student Engagement

Student engagement theory assists in exploring this potential phenomenon, providing a lens to consider it with and frame the topic (Vygotsky, 1962). Psychologist and teacher Lev Vygotsky first theorized about how students successfully learn through positive connections and communications in 1962 (Vygotsky, 1962). Vygotsky's theory suggested that meaningful social environments impact learning, ultimately possessing the ability to lead to greater outcomes when such environments are positively charged with students actively taking part in their education. Subsequent student engagement research and theories have validated Vygotsky's 1962 theory. Specifically, studies have found that active participation in academic and non-academic enrichment during college is successfully linked with greater student success (Astin, 1977, 1993; Feldman and Newcomb, 1969; Kuh, Pace, and Vesper, 1997; Pace, 1990; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). For instance, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, p. 610) wrote that "one of the

most inescapable and unequivocal conclusions we can make is that the impact of college is largely determined by the individual's quality of effort and level of involvement in both academic and non-academic activities." At the college level now, some of that involvement inevitably takes place in the social media sphere – whether purely academic or extracurricular activities, it's a new trajectory for student involvement, which means it can have considerable impact on a student's performance in college (Kane, Alavi, Labianca, & Borgatti, 2014).

Today's social landscape has expanded into the digital domain, and much interaction occurs on social media platforms, a potentially critical tool in the academic arena that some researchers argue is underutilized (Ferrari, McCarthy, & Milner, 2009). Overall, the research is thin with regard to how social media at college levels is received by students (Wymbs, 2011). That is partially because social media is still in its nascent stages and continues to quickly evolve. And yet, as made evident in this introduction, a whole generation of individuals entering college have grown up as the most technologically savvy and digitally aware generation that has ever existed (Van den Bergh & Behrer, 2016).

Potentially, educators, staff and administrators are missing out on a potential tool and missing a venue (social media platforms) where so many student-aged individuals are posting, absorbing, and reflecting their selves (Rinaldo, Tapp, & Laverie, 2011). Ultimately, as Vygotsky's theory suggests, student engagement occurs in a social setting (Vygotsky, 1978). The more positive and proactive the environment, the more successful the student. If emerging research about social media is correct, students have the ability to positively engage on these platforms, which can thereby greatly assist with their feelings of belonging, student engagement, and overall success within academic institutions.

Methodology: A Grounded Theory Case Study

This study examines the social media practices of two-year institutions – specifically, the public community college – in California to understand how students react to social media usage at department levels and how it helps to shape their engagement within the institution. Social media is changing by leaps and bounds. It has been adopted as a key component of any good business marketing strategy. The study leverages a grounded theory research approach (Creswell, 2008), emphasizing experiences, events and processes (Durdella, 2018), to help address a knowledge gap on social media marketing at the two-year college level.

Ultimately, a grounded theory case study approach permitted me to focus on group characteristics – that is, to look at how students respond to and are shaped by social media from the colleges they attend or are thinking of attending. It also allowed for a comparison-focused analysis of the kind of social media posting on the part of two-year institutions (Durdella, p. 126). My research role involved “opportunistic sampling,” an apt phrase that notes my relationship with the campus where I conducted my research. For my grounded theory case study research, I mitigated potential conflicts of interest with triangulation, discussed in depth in Chapter 3.

I engaged in criterion sampling, a method that “works well when all individuals studied are representative of people who have experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 128). The process of interviewing is elucidating and at the pinnacle of grounded theory research (Durdella, 2019, p. 246). I conducted semi-structured interviews with current and outgoing or graduated students who have been part of the media department (also a pseudonym department and major). These students described their experiences with social media at the departmental level. They were asked to share their views on social media usage at the department stage, how

it made them feel, and shared overall feedback about the importance of social media at that level. Questions derived from this study's research questions and were carefully scrutinized by a colleague to look out for potential leading items of inquiry. I interviewed 16 current and former students for this particular component of my research.

The institutional site for this study was Oak Tree Community College (a pseudonym), located in Los Angeles County. The two-year institution was founded in the 1920s and has seen dramatic ethnic and racial diversity in the last 30 years, whereas before it was monolithic and predominately white. I also kept student identities confidential, due to the nature of sharing personal stories of what engagement has meant to them. Since students have had varying levels of economic stability, good and bad experiences with school, and so on, their information was kept confidential to protect them.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study relies on making conclusions about technologies that are still relatively new. Indeed, social media is in its nascent stages and keeps evolving. Yesterday it was Instagram; today Snapchat is king, and who knows what's next? In late 2019, TikTok, a video social media platform, started to gain momentum. Though TikTok, a Chinese-owned platform (Matsakis, 2020), offers a different kind of media channel than Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook, but TikTok is growing in usership at a much higher rate in the U.S., according to most recently available data (Clement, 2020). It is also unclear what direction TikTok is heading, with an announcement made in May 2020 that a former Disney media executive who had been eyed to be the next Disney leader but was passed over for the job took a CEO position with TikTok (Li, S. & Schwartzel, E. (2020, May 19). That, in itself, is a limitation of the study, as social media platform technologies and how quickly they emerge, change and adapt, or disappear cannot

totally be controlled or understood. Other limitations include the sample size and homogeneity – the potentially sharp similarities of students who are sampled and interviewed. More specifically, most of these students are part of a media department, and, it can be deduced, have a better understanding of social media than an average American does. These students reside within a Southern California county where individuals often lead a lifestyle where social media usage could be perceived as commonplace. With social media being so new, furthermore, there may be limits to self-reporting.

In this case study, moreover, there is a reliance on students to share their experiences. Delimitations of the study include the fact that students were specifically chosen to be a part of the study, who are over the age of 18 and are either recent graduates or current individuals attending the institution where the case analysis is taking place. The majority of the students in the pool of selected subjects are also typically centennials or millennials, making them digital natives in many cases or considered extremely well-versed in technology due to their ages and the ubiquitous nature of social media use for their respective generations.

Organization of the Dissertation

This study is organized as a traditional five-chapter dissertation, with a literature review, methodology, results, and findings and recommendations in ensuing chapters. The spirit of this study deals with leveraging new technologies, which makes the concept of a digitized page to complement a five-chapter dissertation exciting, relevant, and a wonderful supplement to the traditional research. This different way of organizing the information can assist the stakeholders as well, focusing on presenting information in a clear, concise manner.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Could social media usage at a college departmental level affect student performance?

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a robust view of the current research related to social media marketing in higher education, which is a new and emerging area, and social media marketing in private sector business to grasp how what we understand about commercial business contexts can apply to higher education. There has been considerable research that demonstrates the importance of comprehensive social media marketing plans on the part of businesses, which can help inform higher education institutions. An examination of literature related to social media marketing practices within the private sector realm demonstrates how people's behaviors, the way they think about a given topic, and the values they hold toward or about a brand – or even a political issue – can be shaped or shifted by the social media landscape (Balakrishnan, Dahnil, & Yi, 2014; Munoz & Wood, 2015).

By contrast, in higher education, there has been research that shows student affinity and usage of social media within a college or university context for the purposes of higher learning. However, research about social media's impacts in higher education is scarce, but the groundbreaking and relatively nascent research that does exist, recent as it is, seems to suggest that social media can be utilized as a positive tool for higher education as a whole (Assimakopoulos, Antoniadis, Kayas, & Dvizac, 2017; Raza, Qazi, & Umer, 2016).

Indeed, early research suggests that social media can aid in student support and promoting overall feelings of student engagement within a two-year or four-year higher education institution (Oliveira & Figueira, 2015; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Melchiorre & Johnson, 2017). These feelings of engagement on the part of students, moreover, have long-

since translated into higher student success and graduation rates, according to research on student engagement (Fisk & Allen, 1993). Put simply, students who feel like they are a part of the social fabric of an institution tend to perform better, according to Fisk and Allen (1993). The theory surrounding student engagement, described in the ensuing paragraph, is crucial to student success – and its rooted in a sense of belonging and identity that today permeates social media (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009).

This research study examined how community colleges currently utilize their official social media to connect with students and potential students and emphasized how social media practices of community colleges can shape student engagement and potential success within the institution. To examine this emerging phenomenon, a grounded theory case analysis was conducted to understand how the use of social media at a California community college department impacts its students.

The theoretical frame for the research focuses largely on student engagement – and seeks to find if social media can be a positive force for student engagement. Psychologist and teacher Lev Vygotsky was among the first to theorize about how students learn through interactions and communications in 1962 (Vygotsky, 1962). Specifically, Vygotsky explored how social environments are key to influence learning – having the impact to lead to greater outcomes. These environments have much to do with other people – those with shared interests, either fellow students or instructors. In his research, Vygotsky (1962) ultimately emphasized the importance of interactions that a student will have with peers and teachers, touching on scaffolding in education and reciprocal learning that necessitate a student's direct engagement. Vygotsky stressed that meaningful student engagement leads to better outcomes for students.

Arguably, social media is a critical platform for such interaction today and can be a valuable tool in an academic arena (Ferrari, McCarthy, & Milner, 2009).

This literature review focuses on two broad topics – social media as it relates to higher education, an area where there is a dearth of research overall on specific studies that relate to social media – and social media practices in business, with a sub-category that focuses on user engagement. In the scope of higher education, this literature review explores and defines student engagement in higher education and focus on potential benefits that can include student success, completion of degree programs, and sense of belonging (Mbodila, Ndebele, & Muhandji, 2014).

In the literature review, I examine the emerging research on social media marketing in higher education, ultimately showing that it strongly suggests there is a direct relationship between college and university use of it for promoting programming and student work and student success overall. Indeed, this review describes and emphasize social media usage and user engagement, as the trends show social media impacts individuals' self-reported feelings of identification and validation (Zywica & Danowski, 2008), ultimately demonstrating the need and merit for closer research and study. Validation, moreover, is a process where an individual feels recognized and accepted (Zywica & Danowski, 2008), and has deep psychological underpinnings. I also discuss the study's theoretical framework, ending the literature review with a summary of what we currently know about social media marketing and student engagement in higher education and my plan to address gaps in what we currently know.

Review of the Empirical Research

Social media marketing has become a common component of any major marketing plan, with brands and non-profit organizations relying heavily on it in order to stay relevant among their consumers and audiences (Aaker, 2012). To understand just how commonplace social

media marketing is, consider that for most brands, companies, political platforms, and non-profit institutions not being on social media can create a visibility issue for them (Yadav & Rahman, 2017). Specifically, that lack of social media presence could make them irrelevant to younger individuals and older people alike, as social media usage has become so common place across demographics related to age (Aaker, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2018).

Indeed, more Americans are using social media, especially young adults and the average college-aged student (Pew Research Center, 2018) who are considered to be tech natives (Van den Bergh & Behrer, 2016) relative to other demographics, a concept discussed later in this literature review. With this in mind, social media marketing is becoming more accepted as a necessary facet of university and college communications, though it's not quite understood and wholeheartedly adapted (Goode & Woodward, 2016). However, three years after its inception, Facebook was lauded in one study as a vehicle for student engagement through greater community building within four-year institutions (Selwyn, 2007). While it's only years later that social media was seen as a tool that could be used by college departments as well, it's interesting to note that students are spending far more time on social media, so the digital sphere becomes an extension in some ways of the college experience and can enhance that experience overall (Raza, Qazi, & Umer, 2016).

Indeed, in 2001, the tech boom brought forth massive literature about technological natives as opposed to those who were dubbed “digital immigrants” (Prensky, 2001). The natives were those with early childhood exposure to technology, with an edge on the “immigrants” who often had a hard time rectifying usage of technology in their daily lives, according to Prensky (2001). Nearly two decades after Prensky (2001) synthesized and described the way by which digital natives absorbed and understood the new technology of the time, an entirely new

generation of young Americans have cropped up who are so native to technology – soon to include social media – that they have never lived their lives without it. Arguably, very few could have conceptualized what would come – a kind of technology boom that not only impacts how people work but how they perceive themselves (Kornfield & Oliver, 2015). In 2018, identity for younger Americans can be tied to technology – to the very devices that impact how we shop, vote, emote, and feel (McCorkindale, DiStaso, & Sisco, 2013).

The Business of Social Media: From Commercial Use to Applications in Higher Education

Words and phrases like “branding,” “digital marketing,” and “user engagement” are commonplace in marketing realms for businesses, both of the for-profit and non-profit variety (Quinton & Simkin, 2016). In fact, research suggests that social media is linked to creation of strong brands, the Aaker (2012) study finding that consumers and the public relate more to companies that they engage more with and feel reflected in. Finding affinity, and identifying, with brands is important to consumers, Aaker’s research suggests (2012), a finding echoed by other research (McFall, 2004; Kavada, 2012). That’s because, the research suggests, individuals want to feel like they are reflected back by companies, that their values are being embraced and respected, and that the companies make them feel good. In fact, there is a facet of self-worth and a value that is being placed through social media (Kavada, 2012).

Despite the increasingly common nature of utilizing social media within business marketing plans, higher education institutions have only begun to catch on to the viability of this important tool that can shape higher education (Moran, Seaman, & Tinti-Kane, 2011). Furthermore, there is not much momentum when it comes to adopting new tactics in marketing, despite business literature that points to the importance of a robust marketing plan that includes

digital platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and more (Moran, Seaman, & Tinti-Kane, 2011).

Applying social media marketing to the higher education arena. So, can social media practices from the private sector realm inform higher education stakeholders? As made evident by this emerging area in higher education, the answer could be that social media will eventually become an important instrument in the toolbox of many college and university departments. As a result of this rapid integration of technology, social media best practices are on the minds of many public information officers and marketing directors who want to utilize technology to help attract new students (Melchiorre & Johnson, 2017). Instructors may have varying degrees of how much they tap into social media at departmental levels to promote the work they and students are doing (Moran, Seaman, & Tinti-Kane, 2011). However, there is a common thread of trying to find ways to leverage it, especially among younger and more tech-savvy instructors, according to one 2011 study (Moran, Seaman, & Tinti-Kane).

This research study takes into account existing literature on social media usage at college or university levels and explores current research on social media's impacts on individuals' engagement and potential academic success linked to positive engagement. The research applies those aspects of the literature review of student engagement theory to demonstrate the need for a case analysis that explores how students describe social media usage at departmental levels and impacts of department-level social media practices on them. As I approach my research, it is first necessary to understand how social media is applied in higher education and how it could be applied through learning about it through a business lens. Indeed, if businesses and non-profit social marketing strategies are indications, proactive and immersive social media marketing practices have a real potential to impact student performance (Munoz & Wood, 2015). As made

clear by Munoz and Wood (2015), students and faculty alike have immersive experiences through social media that strengthen interpersonal relationships and foster a sense of institutional identity. This can ultimately lead to greater student engagement, which can correlate to higher rates of student success, better graduation rates, and better learning outcomes through the very use of social media at departmental or institutional levels (Mbodila, Ndebele, & Muhandji, 2014). As Mbodila, Ndebele, and Muhandji (2014) point out in their Australian university research into social media, a greater feeling of identity and involvement can stem from social media usage at a college level despite the newness of this phenomenon. At their research site, Mbodila, Ndebele, and Muhandji (2014) found that Facebook was an asset in helping students feel more involved and having a greater sense of community.

How social media marketing is currently understood in higher education contexts.

Digital media has changed considerably in just the last 10 years – and certainly in the last 20 years. While not a core focal point of this research study, it is helpful to consider a retrospective examination of digital media to demonstrate its long, but often neglected, impacts on student engagement. Early tech and social channels that were the precursors to social media today were arguably AOL chatrooms, Geocities pages, instant messenger or ICQ, and, later, MySpace and finally Facebook. At least one 2001 study points to the efficacy of digital pages, like Geocities in the late 1990s and early 2000s, in positively engaging students and aiding in their outcomes (Washenberger, 2001). This study seeks to help to examine how – if at all – higher learning institutions, even as narrow as within departments in a wider and larger institution, utilize modern platforms to help students stay engaged and aware of institutional purpose, goals, and programs.

It is worth noting that social media is predominately understood and considered through a business sphere (Tuten & Solomon, 2015) as opposed through a lens of what it can do in higher education (Wymbs, 2011). Although Facebook was launched for social purposes of connecting students within university settings (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009), Facebook has since evolved to networks far beyond academic. The growing body of research about it, however, can be elucidating for higher education establishments to help them better utilize social media beyond mere marketing into the classroom itself – potentially even using it to aid in greater student success.

To better understand this new, emerging phenomenon of digital marketing, it's crucial to examine what businesses and corporations know about social media marketing with regards to opportunities and challenges (Quinton & Simkin, 2016). These lessons, then, can be applied to higher education to better prepare departments in helping students feel reflected, valued, and achieve more strongly as successful higher education establishments. Social media can relate directly to departmental or college programming for the purposes of promoting student work, college goals and mission, and aiding students in feeling like they are integral components of the campus climate (Arnold & Paulus, 2010).

The psychology of social media for college student engagement. Research demonstrates that social media is tied to a student's perception of self within the context of the higher education institution that they are a part of. It is important to note exactly what this kind of "engagement" means, as it is often oriented in student success and completion of a program of study (Ferrari, McCarthy, & Milner, 2009). In research by Ferrari, McCarthy, and Milner (2009), the authors demonstrate that students who feel like they are a part of a social fabric at a college or university are more likely to be successful in their coursework and are more likely to

graduate. Student engagement, the authors note, is deeply social and rooted in feelings of validation. Importantly, students have a desire to feel like they are a part of a community, the authors note in their 2009 research. The take away from the study is that students need a feeling of validation, empowerment, and celebration of their success (Ferrari, McCarthy, & Milner, 2009). This research seems to suggest a need to engage greater social media marketing on the part of departments at higher education learning institutions, as there is a direct benefit for students in terms of their overall feelings of success, self-worth, and validation.

Employing marketing techniques to non-profits is not new (Fisk & Allen, 1993). Fisk and Allen, in particularly innovative research from over two decades ago, looked at methods to market higher education offerings by homing in on where potential students were spending more of their time. They understood that good advertising was focused on tapping into an audience's feeling and sense of belonging, but they saw that messaging to traditional platforms of the day. They focused on traditional marketing, such as radio, billboards, and TV ads, during programs that students were more likely to be watching based on demographic features, but little did they know the opportunities for marketing that would come just a few years later.

Understanding today's marketing landscape and adapting to new technologies.

Higher education institutions have demonstrated that they are interested in better ways to promote institutional image following the major tech boom, both prior to and following the advent of social media marketing (Cetin, 2003). According to research from Cetin (2003), this encompasses the idea of improving "competitive positioning," which gives an organization an advantage over the competition, through resources and tools available. Specifically, Cetin looked at the need to understand where potential students were spending their time and the need

to position marketing – at the time more traditional – to venues and platforms they were engaging with. Interestingly, there is little to no mention of digital marketing by Cetin.

For so long, most advertisements and marketing have been focused on print, TV, or billboards (Applegate, 1998; Krishen, Berezan, Agarwal, & Kachroo, 2016). In fact, digital marketing as a practice is fairly new. In 2003, Facebook was beginning to gain a following and by 2004 became a part of a millennial college student's social fabric. However, it took several years more for a small recognition of how social media can be a pedagogical tool in higher education (Rinaldo, Tapp, & Laverie, 2011).

Indeed, Facebook emerged in February 2004 (Heer & Boyd, 2005). Some 18-year-olds attending college today have arguably had their likeness – their identity and with it, potentially, their sense of self – directly correlated to use of social media websites since their most formative years (Marwick, 2013). It is what they know and it's here to stay (Ouirdi, Ouirdi, Segers, & Henderickx, 2014).

While many studies have concluded that Facebook may have negative effects on users (Wohn & LaRose, 2014; Yao & Zhong, 2014; Mesch & Talmud, 2006), four University of Texas scholars argue the merits of its effectiveness for youth engagement, particularly with civic and other democratic institutions (Valenzuela, 2009). The study ranked the intensity of Facebook use while juxtaposing that data with nodes focused on gender, age, hometown, political engagement, parental education, life satisfaction, and civic engagement. It found very little difference in Facebook usage among various demographics. A refreshed study on social media today, especially as prominence of other mediums have grown and there's a need to understand how students receive them, would be pertinent to the discussion. It would have also been beneficial to see a greater emphasis given to how the authors ranked "life satisfaction,"

especially given the highly subjective nature of the question. Many different things can impact satisfaction at a given point and it's an odd trait to include in the various demographic questions.

Social Media Marketing to Today's College Students

The bulk of today's college students are millennials and centennials (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Many consider Generation Y, millennials, to be the savviest of all generations when it comes to technology, but there's one group, just behind them, that has lived and breathed technology from age zero (Pew Research Center, 2018). Generation Z, also known as centennials, are turning 18 and beginning to attend college (Tysjac, 2017). They have an edge in understanding technology in a way that no other generation before them did because technology has been around them since infancy by the very nature of their year of birth (Sutherland, Davis, Terton, & Visser, 2018). This generation, note Sutherland, Davis, Terton, and Visser (2018), have grown up with social media and are beyond merely tech-savvy. Indeed, the authors note that they lived and breathed technology since their early formative years. This demographic, the authors add, has an expectation to be catered to in terms of social media marketing, which is a part of their daily lives.

The business of social media for colleges and university campuses. To be effective at recruitment and retention, colleges arguably need to have a greater understanding of how to adapt social media marketing – as defined by businesses and corporate organizations – to a college setting where the technologies are more ubiquitous among those attending these higher education facilities (Gerlich, Browning, & Westermann, 2010). Gerlich, Browning, and Westermann (2010), for instance, argue that with a growing expectation for social media engagement, higher education will have to step up recruitment tactics on social media sites and social media engagement procedures to help students feel like they are a part of the campus

social fabric, and to treat social media like a very integral part of a college or university marketing or engagement plan.

From a business perspective, this means a more robust comprehension of how to promote content on a digital marketing field (Rowley, 2008). Perceived as exclusive to businesses and corporate interests, this kind of digital marketing is now so common place as a tactic that businesses risk failure if they ignore it (Rowley, 2008). Now, moreover, marketers, including at higher education levels, must tap into smartphone usage on social media (Yu, 2013). This point is echoed by other business scholars who argue for intelligent marketing – looking toward platforms that users spend most time on – that allows the audience to feel like they have a psychological, indeed a human and natural engagement, connection with a brand (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2016). Shopping is now a deeply social experience, the authors note, and like many facets of one's life, those occasions and feelings about them now go straight to social media channels. This concept does have, however, wide applications beyond businesses, as marketing and digital understanding have become necessary for success of universities as well, where students are also “shopping” or making value calls based on their identification with social media preferences.

Building momentum with better digital marketing practices for academic departments and programs. Undoubtedly, there is an expectation that instructors and departmental program heads do a better job of marketing higher education offerings (Sutherland, Davis, Terton, & Visser, 2018). In fact, since the early 2000s, journal articles and books have attempted to help instructors come up with ways to shape higher education understanding of what they can offer (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002; George, 2000; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Gibbs and Knapp (2002) write about college mission, legacy, and how an institution can

demonstrate what an instructor or program can do for them. They went so far as to create a guide in their research for instructors so that they can work toward better marketing of their own programming. The authors note that there are varying levels of marketing proficiency, with some older instructors more averse to promoting their own course offerings and feeling like that is the overall responsibility of the college. And yet, with threats to programs and a need to boost enrollment numbers, many instructors are interested in playing a role to help strengthen their programs in terms of enrollment and visibility (Gibbs and Knapp, 2002).

Taking control helps instructors, ultimately, say the authors (Gibbs and Knapp, 2002). This kind of direct control helps instructors to take ownership of their program, prompting these faculty members to control aspects of their classes or programming, and helps them to recruit new students into their departments. George (2000), conversely, focused on more traditional advertisements and how it relates to institutional image. By 2007, some discussions of web-based marketing in higher education was being discussed, focusing on Facebook (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).

Taken a step further, social media marketing at departmental levels is often a less expensive way of building momentum among students to help them feel more involved, more engaged, and can potentially aid students in greater educational (and vocational) success. The way by which college students communicate has shifted to a degree that social media usage in higher education will eventually need to become more commonplace, better understood, and utilized for better program success. Indeed, as highlighted in the research, colleges and universities will need to understand where most current and future students spend a significant portion of their time – and that's on social media platforms.

Identity, Emerging Technologies, and User Engagement in Colleges and Universities

The impacts of social media on identity or self, especially as its use for socialization and relationship building has grown, started to become a point of interest to researchers who examine student engagement since Facebook sprung up in 2004 (Greenhow & Robelia, 2004). To better understand how social media can impact identity, however, it is instructive to understand how humans engage with it, and, in this study, how students specifically engage with it. The core principal of Lev Vygotsky's research on student engagement (Vygotsky, 1962) is particularly instructive with regard to identity, especially as Vygotsky went on to advance his understanding of the way by which students find meaning in their academic work (Vygotsky (1978; 1986; 1987). His later work furthered academic understanding of cultural-historical psychology. He examined the idea that higher order, a psychological concept that is best understood through human relationships, culture, and historical and linguistic context, are rooted in human thought, the way people speak, and how they act. In his research, moreover, Vygotsky focused on what makes meaning and what aids in engagement. Interestingly, research in the last five years has tied social media networks to modern-day meaning (Kane, Alavi, Labianca, & Borgatti, 2014). Specifically, the aforementioned researchers write: "Networks that occur on and through social media sites [are] shaped in part by the characteristics of those media" (Kane, et al., 2014, p. 280). New research also suggests that theories of student engagement will need to reconsider how new emerging technologies become platforms for that engagement (Kane et al., 2014).

College student engagement. Historically, student engagement in higher education has occurred in a physical space – on an actual brick-and-mortar campus. However, the idea of physical environment in higher education (Haskins, 1957) is changing with the advent and growth of technology. This phenomenon is clearly seen in higher education, where much of the

curriculum is going online and where the average-aged student today is often engaged with their social circle through personal devices, particularly mobile phone apps on social media networks (Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007; Jacobsen & Forte, 2011). In his 1957 research, Haskins explored the idea of the higher education establishment from the perspective of what the physical environment means and that physical setting needed to be a constant for modern universities to continue to rise. Nonetheless, virtual worlds and emerging technologies increasingly blur the world between physical and digital worlds in terms of impact and importance (Kane et al., 2014). Indeed, for typical college-aged individuals, social media is so important that it has created a new dimension in personal identity (Dalton & Crosby, 2013). In their emerging research, Kane et al. write: “these new tools... provide users... with the capabilities that allow them to act and interact with each other in novel ways that are difficult or were impossible to do in earlier online or offline settings” (2014). Moreover, new technologies will force reconsideration or re-adaptation of engagement theories. Ultimately, “these novel capabilities may undermine or violate the assumptions of established theory, potentially requiring researchers to adapt these theories for application to social media settings or possibly develop new ones” (Kane et al., 2014, p. 276).

Student digital identities and feelings of validation. In broad terms, the use of social media and how it impacts psychology is often related to or described as user engagement or self-reported value, which is correlated with a social media image (Krishen, Berezan, Agarwal, & Kachroo, 2016). To be clear, the way that community colleges are using social media channels like Facebook and Twitter, now universal social mediums, is understudied in academic research but a staple of every major business marketing plan (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011; Gerlich, Browning, & Westermann, 2010). That should not be the case, as younger Americans are more

likely to engage and build relationships through social media, often finding validation on these media channels (McCorkindale, DiStaso, & Sisco, 2013). Since 2013, when McCorkindale, DiStaso, and Sisco (2013) looked at millennials' use of social media, Instagram has become another vehicle for marketing at the college level, especially among the new emerging generation (Sutherland, Davis, Terton, & Visser, 2018). This newer generation to come after millennials or Generation Y – known as Generation Z – is a tech native generation with a greater interaction rate with brands, corporations, and non-profits (Van den Bergh & Behrer, 2016).

Considering the aforementioned “digital native” nature of social media use among younger Americans – that is individuals going to college today who were born and raised in the tech age – it’s no surprise that studies show 25% of college students today will contact their instructors through social media (Parr, 2015). These students, according to Parr (2015), spend a significant portion, more than three hours a day, on various social media sites. We can deduce that these students feel comfortable on these platforms and use them as an extension of email to a degree. Instructors, moreover, have become more receptive to being “friends” or “followers” with students on social media, with some instructors even leveraging the platforms to connect with students about classwork, readings, and generally being available to students (Hou & Macnamara, 2017). Historically, instructors were more worried about such social media contacts. Now, these faculty members have warmed up to the idea, especially as so many treat their social media pages as public pages. Indeed, in the last two years, popular journal articles have shown that higher education institutions are turning to social media to build connections and help promote students to “tune in” more – to be more present in their university and college settings so that there is a greater sense of community (Berger & Wild, 2016).

Social media as a pedagogical and institutional resource. Relatively new and emerging research suggests that utilizing social media in a higher education context may very well aid in better educational outcomes and reported student engagement (Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2011; Junco, Elavsky, & Heiberger, 2013). That engagement, moreover, is tied to overall success where students enjoy their college experiences (DeAndrea, Ellison, & LaRose, 2012), and if student engagement research is applied to social media, this could positively impact grades and help graduation rates. In fact, Twitter has been researched as a pedagogical tool that has aided student success in programs and classes, as made clear by the research of Junco, Elavsky, and Heiberger (2013). Furthermore, research from Ferrari, McCarthy, and Milner (2009) suggests that social media usage at a college level informs students' identities within their institution. Therefore, value is placed on social media as a tool that helps students feel "engaged" with the organization and these students are more likely to perform at greater success levels. As discussed in the previous section, there's a psychology to social media usage and engagement where individuals began to find identity, meaning, connections, and even validation through social media (Ferrari, McCarthy, and Milner, 2009). Student engagement at the community college that utilizes social media as a resource (Kane et al., 2014) can translate into students graduating or transferring to a four-year university, which potentially denotes greater success for students in terms of employment and marketability (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2001).

Research on social media as pedagogical tool within the two- or four-year higher education sphere is sparse. To understand its utility, social media's impact on identity first has to be addressed through the lens of higher education. One of the first instances where the concept of digital identity is discussed can be found in the Journal of College and Character. At the very

start of their article, the authors describe digital identity as “the composite of images that individuals present, share, and promote for themselves in the digital domain” (Dalton & Crosby, 2013). The subject, however, is relatively new. It’s only in the last 5 years that research into social media has touched on psychology, which includes identity and expression. For instance, Junco (2014) discusses social media identity through the lens of online identification, which refers to how people ultimately present themselves in the digital sphere. Junco notes that the digital space provides more control in how individuals unveil themselves, writing that there are three kinds of identity that can result in the digital space: anonymity, pseudoanonymity, or true identity. True identity refers to revealing one’s true self, while anonymity means no social media footprint (or presence) at all (Junco, 2014). For nearly 16 years, however, there has been an increased predisposition on the part of young people to be connected on social internet platforms, starting with MySpace in 2003 and Facebook in 2004, and finally moving to newer, more popular platforms today (Jacobsen & Forte, 2011).

Summary of Empirical Research and Statement of the Research Problem

The current research related to social media and engagement is emerging and relatively sparse, demonstrating a need for additional research to examine how social media impacts student engagement in higher education, especially in community college program settings. Additional research can ultimately help faculty better anticipate the needs of a bulk of new college students – often centennials who are the truest digital natives in how technology and social media was around for much (or their whole) lives. Research demonstrates that social media impacts identity, and some emerging research demonstrates that social media can be used a pedagogical tool and aid in student engagement. However, there is an overwhelming lack of empirical research findings that show what these impacts are. This study seeks to address those

shortcomings in research through a case study of an academic program in a community college setting, where social media is seen as a necessary facet of instruction. Through conversations with students and campus stakeholders, this study sought to demonstrate the impact that social media potentially has on student success in higher education. The research study also examined how community colleges currently utilize their official social media to connect with students and prospective students. It also explored how social media practices of community colleges shape student engagement and student success.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to understand and inform social media usage and influence by programs and departments in community colleges. This study sought to examine the social media practices of two-year institutions – specifically, public community colleges – in California to understand how these institutions can leverage social media to help students feel more engaged, and, thus, be more successful students within departments. Social media is changing by leaps and bounds (Arora & Sanni, 2018). It has been adopted as a key component of any good business marketing strategy (Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

It is unclear that community colleges have understood how to tap into this now-ubiquitous marketing strategy (Pew Research Center, 2018). Initial examinations of college social media pages suggest an infrequency in posting as well as an overall lack of user engagement for most college departments. Yet the majority of students entering college are tech natives (Marwick, 2013), having an understanding of technology that is unprecedented for generations before them by the sheer value of having had exposure to its many aspects since infancy (McCorkindale, DiStaso, & Sisco, 2013). Furthermore, students have unique preferences where social media channels are concerned, often dependent on their ages (Kolowich, 2015). Social media, moreover, directly affects students' own perception of happiness and involvement on their campuses, according to prior research conducted in the international arena (Valenzuela, Park, Nams, & Kee, 2009).

As a result of this rapid integration of technology, high-impact social media practices are on the minds of many public information officers who work at the college level and want to leverage technology to help attract new students (Melchiorre, 2017). It makes the issue a

significant one to study, with implications for community college marketing and potentially for four-year universities as well. Yet, it is not studied enough. That's because research on social media marketing is readily available but usually applies to Fortune 500 companies (Bhanot, 2012) rather than non-profit or educational interests (Munoz & Wood, 2015).

Unfortunately, two-year colleges are arguably at an economic disadvantage. In terms of funding, colleges are dependent on enrollment to determine their funding. In recent years, there's been a general downward trend in two-year college enrollment, possibly due to attendance at four-year institutions being more easily accessible, remediation requirements decreasing, and an overall job market that generally improved since the Great Recession of 2008 (Guzman-Lopez, 2017). A better social media strategy on the part of marketing and communications departments at two-year colleges may be a part of an overall approach to better recruit and retain students.

Research Questions

The research questions that guide this study are:

1. How do community colleges currently utilize their official social media to connect with students and prospective students?
2. How do social media practices of community colleges shape student engagement and student success?

Chapter Organization

This chapter comprises 11 sections (including this “Introduction”), following the title page, which explain the research process, techniques adapted to investigating the research questions, and provide information on how data was procured and analyzed. The components that follow the “Introduction” sections are the “Research Tradition,” which describes the theory

and tradition used, the “Research Setting and Context,” which focuses on where data had been gathered. “Data Sources and Research Sample” and “Data Collection Instruments” describes the subjects of the study, size and scope of research, and the methods for collecting data, respectively. “Data Collection Procedures” discusses efforts to mitigate potential researcher bias and informed consent, among other facets of procedures adopted in research. Finally, the “Researcher Roles” section describes the role of the researcher in the study and beyond, and potential ramifications of those roles.

Research Design

The study leveraged a grounded theory research approach (Creswell, 2008), which combines the processes of data collection and analysis (Birks & Mills, 2011). It also emphasizes experiences, events, and processes (Durdella, 2019), and allowed for the formation of codes that became apparent through the gathering of research. This is known as theoretical sampling, which means the research began with questions and a theoretical framework, then gathered data to show whether or not it addresses or helps to shape understanding of the phenomena being observed (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

This approach ultimately helped address a knowledge and practice gap on social media use in academic programs and its impacts through careful observation of a program that has observed some successes through using social media but is unclear on how it ultimately affects students. Indeed, the approach supports the formation of an explanatory model, through data and information collected (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) – in this case, a model of how students react to social media usage at departmental levels within their colleges. Through interviews with student participants who were eligible to take part in the research, I asked a series of questions that looked for clear patterns for impacts of social media. Using the described experiences of

participants who shared their feelings regarding official pages ultimately allowed for a comparison-focused analysis of the kind of social media posting on the part of two-year institutions that had an impact on the participants (Durdella, p. 126).

As we have seen, research suggests that social media usage by organizations can shape engagement of students (Ferrari, McCarthy, & Milner, 2009). That engagement, moreover, at a higher learning institution can be massively important to student success (Krishen, Berezan, Agarwal, & Kachroo, 2016). In 1962, psychologist and instructor Lev Vygotsky was the first to theorize about how students learn through interactions and communications. Specifically, Vygotsky explored how social environments are key to influence learning – having the impact to lead to greater outcomes. In his research, Vygotsky ultimately emphasized the importance of meaningful interactions that a student would have with peers and teachers. Today, social media is the platform for much interaction, and can be a valuable tool in an academic arena.

With this in mind, a grounded theory case study (Birks & Mills, 2001) provides valuable research into understanding the emerging phenomenon of using social media as a potential method for helping students feel more engaged and, potentially, have greater academic success as a result. The study begins with two questions, and through careful literature review, a case is made for additional research (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Grounded theory research necessitates concurrent data collection and analysis (Durdella, p. 249-251), which in this case was derived from students who were interviewed and observations of the department being examined. The data was collected in interviews, analyzed through segmenting and coding, then theoretical sampling of the data, additional interviewing, and, finally, segmenting and coding again (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). After gathering data, coding information through text aided in formulating conclusions about emerging patterns that exist and helped to highlight where future research may

be needed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Participants in the research study were homogenous in terms of region where they reside but diverse in terms of gender, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. They shared experiences relative to their department, providing an example of how social media can be used more broadly by institutions. Their responses, as discussed later in this chapter, were coded to look for patterns and trends.

Through triangulation of data collection procedures, specifically leveraging both interviews and observations, I sought to increase the credibility of the research findings. For instance, my research study documented, as part of the case study, social media usage of a specific anonymous department within a community college, understanding the experiences of student participants who had taken a class or courses within the specific program. I spent time in the field, conducting semi-structured interviews with current and previous students at an anonymous Southern California college to gauge their reactions to various kinds of social media posts from a departmental community college department.

Research Setting

The institutional site for this study was Oak Tree Community College (a pseudonym), located in the Los Angeles County. The two-year institution was founded close to a century ago and serves a diverse demographic of students. Today, nearly 6 in 10 people who reside in the city in which Oak Tree Community College (OTCC) is situated are foreign born (U.S. Census Bureau). Indeed, close to 70 percent of the residents speak a language other than English at home. This demographic is reflective in the college's student body of 30,000. A sizable portion are Latino, at about a third. Many students are foreign born, from countries such as Iran or Armenia. Caucasians make up 20%. Asian and Pacific Islanders make up less than 10%, while 4% identify as Filipino. Black students and American Indians make up a small portion.

The specific site of the research is the media department (a pseudonym), which has seen an increase in student enrollment and learning outcomes in the last 24 months. Specifically, the instructor rebranded and recreated much of the program by putting student work online in terms of showcasing, creating a sense of comradery on the part of students by amplifying the use of social media on the part of the program, and has an overall approach of leveraging today's emerging technologies which students are spending much of their time.

Site Selection

My site selection strategy encompasses a careful consideration of programs that are currently popular and use emerging technology – social media – as a tool. Specifically, I have utilized a criterion sampling strategy that used a screening protocol to identify students with opinions on social media usage at a specific program-level with Oak Tree Community College. These students met specific criterion – there was an emphasis of similarity – in terms of location, program studied or coursework taken, and recency in terms of when coursework was taken (Patton, 2001, p. 238). The program is of particular interest because of the forward-thinking manner that it has utilized social media as a pedagogical and student engagement tool. Furthermore, student characteristics are relevant to the study, in that these students have experienced a high-level of social media usage within their classroom for the purposes of promoting classroom student-led projects, showcasing student work and projects, and more. The students are also diverse, which is reflective of the county overall in terms of cultural composition that are non-homogenous. Lastly, the students who participate in the research have taken and completed at least one class in the Media program. They were fully informed about the study, signed an informed consent form that makes it clear participation is completely optional.

My role as someone close to this program made this research opportunistic in nature and requires triangulation methods to ensure validity of the research (Durdella, 2019). Furthermore, I have had the ability to see this specific department and a program grow in part through social media over the course of 18 months. In the grounded theory case study, I presented the experiences of students who are part of this specific program to see how departmental social media usage impacts them at the college and how they react to it, especially in terms of feelings of belonging as well as with success (Ferrari, McCarthy, & Milner, 2009).

Data Sources and Sample

In this study, I utilized multiple sources of data, including students and site observations. To start, I interviewed 16 students at a local Southern California community college, Oak Tree Community College, who have been through media department coursework and completed at least one class, many of them working toward an AA degree or who had recently completed their studies at the college. The demographics of the 16 student participants, as outlined in Chapter 4, are diverse in terms of racial, gender, and age makeup and identification. The group of participants represented a makeup that is representative of California's community college demographics which are diverse. Five student participants described themselves as "White," and the remainder were a mixture of races ranging from Latino/a/x to Middle Eastern and Black. Student participants were as young as Centennials and as old as Boomers, in terms of generational makeup. I focused on these participants to understand the impact social media at the departmental level had on their engagement through their described experiences. That engagement, defined in my literature review, focuses on students feeling like they are a part of the department and having a strong sense of belonging. Engagement, moreover, is positively correlated with student success, which could denote graduating, transferring to a four-year

university, or finding success in their career path. The interviews were semi-structured in nature. These interviews helped to highlight any limitations or areas of growth in understanding emerging technologies at college levels and observe these phenomena in the community college setting.

Sampling Strategies

I engaged in a mixed sampling strategy that includes criterion, snowball, and theoretical sampling approaches, as well as archival data use. My research role involved opportunistic sampling, an apt phrase that notes my existing relationship with the campus where I had conducted much, but certainly not all, of the research. For the sake of student anonymity, the institution was not be identified by name or markers that can easily be traced to it. I sought to mitigate bias in this opportunistic sampling by using triangulation, working with colleagues and my chair, keeping a journal and referring back to it regularly to make certain I was remaining impartial in questioning, and using semi-structured interviews so that students can speak more openly about what they want rather than exerting too much control in the interview process.

Sampling Approach for Students

I used a mixed sampling strategy consisting of a criterion sampling strategy and snowball sampling. Specifically, I utilized a criterion sampling strategy with prospective student participants and reached out to prospective participants by utilizing lists of students who have taken at least one course in the media department at Oak Tree Community College rather than choosing specific students. Here, I shared, via email with prospective participants, a brief screening protocol to determine if they ought to be chosen for the study. This was shared with

them, moreover, through an independent third party who sent out the email. The criteria were that the students must have taken at least one class within the program, completed that one class (or more), be a current student or a former student of the college, and be at least 18 years of age or older.

After my initial criterion sampling strategy, in my grounded theory theoretical sampling approach, I looked for students who can help inform the research topic by updating whom I sampled from coded categories/patterns that emerge from initial or early data analysis. This approach meant that it was through data collection where I decided what other data needs to be collected, while encouraging the emergence of new theories and ideas through data collection. Specifically, theoretical sampling is a method that “works well when all individuals studied are representative of people who have experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 128).

Ethical Considerations

For my case study grounded theory research, I needed to mitigate potential conflicts of interest. To do so, I brought on an objective party to keep me on task for the purposes of this research. This individual sent out an email to student lists to invite them to research, and referred the students who responded and qualified to participate to me. In this case, a peer or research colleague serves as a form of investigator triangulation. Furthermore, for those students being interviewed – they were all advised that they do not have to participate in research, were given and signed informed consent forms, and were told that they could walk away from participating at any point in the research (Durdella, p. 208). Students were also kept anonymous, due to the nature of sharing personal stories of what engagement has meant to them. Since students have had varying levels of economic stability, good and bad experiences with school, and so on, their information was kept confidential to protect them.

Data Collection Instruments

I utilized a grounded theory case study to explore my research questions, and I also used semi-structured interviewing for the case analysis. Due to the backyard nature of the research study that I conducted, this section also addresses potential ethical issues and considerations. The importance of the research study cannot be overstated, as many college and university departments seek to find new ways to engage students. Findings that are applicable were made quickly available to “practitioners for local use with a set of actionable recommendations” (Durdella, p. 248) through publicizing this dissertation.

One of the main data collection instruments that had been utilized in this grounded theory case analysis is the interview (Durdella, p. 246). I conducted interviews with students in the case analysis of the media department program, which was the main case analysis. Invitation letters and consent forms made the non-obligatory nature of the research clear.

Screening Protocol

In order to screen prospective students, I shared a brief interview protocol with them that includes some of the following questions:

- Have you taken at least one class within the media department?
- Have you completed the class or classes?
- Are you a current student?
- Are you a former student?
- Are you at least 18 years of age or older?

These questions aided in finding potential students who can participate in the study, based on the criteria described above.

Student Interview Protocol

My research study sought to find out how social media usage by department or program is tied to student engagement and, potentially, student success in two-year college contexts. The students themselves are crucial to understanding the potential impacts that social media at departmental or program levels have on their feelings of being a part of campus and engaged in programming. I conducted personal, semi-structured interviews of students by utilizing a colleague to recruit them and observe the interview process to mitigate potential research bias.

Questions asked of students were directly inspired from the research questions of this study. Questions were both broad and narrow in scope, as needed, and depending on students' own experiences. Categories of questions emphasized and covered:

- Length of time student had been a part of the department.
- How the program made them feel about their future university and/or job trajectory.
- How frequently they use social media.
- Explain how social media was used by them for the purposes of class or the program.
- How that usage made them feel overall.

Questions were formed through a system of checks and balances before any students are approached to ensure a non-judgmental, non-leading nature of any questioning. Specifically, I conducted a pilot interview with a volunteer participant for feedback. I also checked with at least one colleague to ensure the non-biased and non-leading nature of questions.

Further, it also was useful to operate under the idea that researchers “are outsiders who walk into a field setting and start to gather information on a social scene” (p. 263). This idea is one that forces objectivity upon the researcher and keeps them out of the questioning beyond conducting interviews. I utilized a quiet environment that feels safe – in terms of location, temperature, and external noise – for interviews of student participants. This environment was a

room that was not connected to the program and provided a quiet atmosphere. Through careful listening, I ensured that students felt safe to share their experiences and, at the same time, feel validated in sharing their experiences. The semi-structured interviewing protocol was also of use in asking relevant follow-up questions that aided in better analysis and methodological integration of data analysis (p. 262).

With respect to ethical issues in interview and participant confidentiality throughout the interview process, I did not record personally identifiable information on the interview protocols. In addition, I made certain to use code names for data analysis and reporting, as some of the potential interviewees were at-risk students when they attended the institution. Code names may also have allowed students feel more candid as they share information, and the research site also remained anonymous.

Media Department Observation Guide

In qualitative research, observations are effective ways of gathering data in a very natural way (Durdella, p. 223). While observing is a great way of understanding the “intimacy and closeness in social settings,” it is instructive to develop an observation guide to help in fieldwork. In the context of this study, I observed in the OTCC media department classroom and academic spaces from September to December 2019. Participant observation questions (Spradley, 1979; Spradley, 1980) included for my case study analysis and fieldwork ultimately aided in formulating questions for students in the case analysis:

- Where do students interact as they produce their work and how would the places they interact be described?
- How is social media used by the students?
- For what observable purpose is it being used?

- Is there a way of describing how students feel by using this type of media?
- Who participates in it?
- Is it restricted to just the program domain within classrooms? If not, describe where else the interaction and social media use occurs.
- For what purpose is the social media occurring?
- What do the social media channels look like?
- How do students feel as they utilize this social media?

Data Collection Procedures

In this research study, I utilized semi-structured interviewing with media department students at OTCC. In addition, I performed site observation as a means to guide my research study. It is important to note that I conducted backyard research that is rooted in grounded theory (Durdella, p. 103), which is informed by the social sciences – utilizing social patterns and structures in the area of my research.

Interviews with Students

The process of interviewing is elucidating and at the pinnacle of grounded theory research (Durdella, p. 246). I conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 current and outgoing or graduated students who have been part of the Media Program at Oak Tree Community College. All participants were adult students who are at least 18 years or older. These students described their experiences with social media at the departmental level. I asked them to share their views on social media usage at the media department stage, how it made them feel, and share overall feedback about the importance of social media at that level. My areas of focus derived from research questions and were carefully scrutinized by a colleague to look out for potential leading items of inquiry. Interviewing 16 current and former students, I shared a

consent form that fully informs them about the nature of the research (p. 230). I indicated to interview participants that they could opt out at any time. At the end of the interview, I thanked all participants, but there was no incentive for research participation as a means of mitigating bias or influencing favorable responses from students.

Physical On-Site Media Department Observations

Moreover, as mentioned above, I made on-site field observations within the media department from September 2019 to December 2019 and observe students and faculty who create social media postings for the official pages of the department. I observed in the setting where students in the case study produce their academic work, where they interact with one another as peers, where students and faculty interact in instructional and department settings, and where much student social media occurs naturally and as a part of what the OTCC media department produces. To keep a record, I made sure I was journaling during this time by jotting information down in the field and writing field notes when left the field. I used the student observation guide to aid where, when, and what I observed.

Data Analysis Procedures

In this section, I discuss the way that I conceptualized my research, through a lens as an instructor and researcher, and the analytical process overall. I also discuss the tools to analyze data. To start, I discuss means to mitigate research bias and the concrete actions taken to avoid this.

Data Analysis and Grounded Theory

My grounded theory case analysis utilized interviews with students that are one-on-one and range from 30 minutes to an hour and physical on-site observation field notes. As stated in the student interview protocol, students who partook in the research are both current and previous, and research triangulation helps mitigate consequences of bias. After data collection, I segmented and coded transcribed student interviews, and compared this information to observational field notes to form categories of information. These categories, moreover, were compared and contrasted to identify clear patterns (Durdella, p. 267). The coding and

segmenting are part of grounded theory's constant-comparative method (Durdella, p. 267-269), which is used throughout the process of fieldwork and data collection, as well as in analysis. The analysis focused on naming each word, line, or segment of data and it looked for codes to sift through and organized data to look for emerging themes (Durdella, p. 268).

Preliminary Data Analysis

There are three important segments of analysis, which are preliminary thematic and interpretation. In the preliminary analysis, I utilized traditional transcription to help me go through audio recordings of interviews, making certain that the names of students are not utilized and remain confidential by assigning a number to each participant. Conducting transcriptions on my own, while laborious, aided to verify accuracy and listen for student emotions in responses transcribed as well (such as long pauses). I also utilized field notetaking to help better understand student interactions within the media department and demonstrate their experiences. From there, I was able to segment and code responses from students, and was able to triangulate this information with observational field notes. This approach aided in the next step of analyzing my data.

Thematic Data Analysis

The next step in my analysis was to code and categorize (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007) information based on observational field notes and interviews with students. In the case of student participants, I interviewed, focused on getting transcriptions, code, and recoded in a constant comparative method. As made clear in the research of Glaser and Strauss (1967), constant comparative method allows for the formation of a grounded research theory, particularly in noting where more data needs to be collected. Through the research questions and gathering of qualitative data from student participants who met requirements to be interviewed, it

became clearer what other data should be gathered to further inform the research at hand (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Following gathering of data, I also examined field notes and text in transcribed data files using ATLAS.ti, a premier software. I then started moving toward a more analytical frame. I looked for emerging patterns that I could then analyze and see where conclusions could be drawn about the nature of social media usage at departmental levels within two-year college levels (Durdella, p. 273-274). These patterns were noted within the aforementioned software, and in my digital and handwritten notes. Student recordings were transcribed and, to protect anonymity of students, destroyed after transcription. Names of students were omitted from the transcriptions and from the research,

Interpretation

As an instructor who cares about student success, engagement, and retention, this research matters to me on a personal level. I looked forward to the part of the study where I could analyze the data, though, initially I could not see the full picture or understand how I would go about it. I did know, however, that emerging themes would be important to consider and would impact my area of study most (Durdella, p. 274). I examined my research and sharing it as a researcher, instructor, stakeholder, and more. Ultimately, my research has immediate and practical implications for community colleges and, potentially, four-year universities in understanding how social media can be a tool. I seek to share this research with practitioners who can learn from this research.

Researcher Roles

One of the most crucial factors in mitigating potential bias is understanding one's own role in the research being conducted (Durdella, p. 303). I am a researcher, college professor and educator, and adviser to student media and publications. I am aware of how I feel about topics

that could affect this research study. As a result, I took concrete steps to avoid researcher bias in data analysis. My researcher role is clearly defined so that I know who I am in the context of my work and understand my roles beyond the research taking place (Durdella, p. 299-301).

To start, I believe very strongly in student success and have taken concrete actions within the community college to push for more student engagement, which I have found is linked to my students' success in terms of grades and completion of coursework (Kuh, 2009). The way I try to provide such an environment of student success has included more field trip and conference opportunities, turning social media at the departmental level over to students, creating clear roles for students and checking in with them, and taking other similar steps. Furthermore, this research is important to me as a practitioner – but beyond the scope of my work, it has very real potential effects for departments across the country, so they can better understand social media as a tool that can help students.

As a result of my work, I know that I am inclined to have a more favorable understanding of how student engagement can be positive with social media usage at departmental levels. Thus, I made certain to use a research triangulation method in my interviewing and researching that included observing, interviewing, and, potentially, surveying, while leveraging a colleague to help mitigate bias by providing a checks and balances system (Durdella, p. 115). In terms of data, this helped to ensure validity and cross-reference findings through coding and general themes that emerge over the course of the research. Indeed, this strategy allowed for correcting potential research bias by providing a system of checks and balances – making certain researcher effect is mitigated.

Beyond personal considerations in how I could impact the study, as a researcher I also sought to constantly think about how the study itself can impact students who are interviewed.

For that reason, I made sure to keep the students anonymous, which they were all advised of, and this may help them feel more open to sharing their stories as well as realize there is no reward or penalty to sharing. To be clear, since the students were sharing personal anecdotes and information about their own lives, they remained anonymous to protect them. The institution, furthermore, should not become a flashpoint to praise or criticize social media practices, and, as such, also remain anonymous.

Chapter 4

Results

In this chapter, I discuss key patterns that emerged over the course of interviewing the 16 student participants who shared their experiences in the media department program at Oak Tree Community College, the site of this research's case study. I also describe the site observations that took place from September to December 2019 at Oak Tree Community College's media department, which aids in providing greater context to student participants' interviews. Observations took place during classroom work on the part of students and during student interactions when publications were being created for the college. The interviewing component of the research, which is the core focus of Chapter 4, leveraged grounded theory, which included semi-structured interviewing of participants who were at least 18-years-old and have taken at least one course in the department.

The results indicated that the student participants were universally successful in the program, with many describing success in a career path born from the department's core teaching outcomes. Some student participants exhibited a varying degree of comfort during the interview process initially, with some pausing for validation at first regarding the way they were answering questions. As a researcher committed to ethical interviewing practice in social science research, I reiterated the consent forms that students signed that emphasized there were no wrong or right answers and no rewards or penalties imposed for participation. This appeared to put participants at ease and allowed them to feel greater comfort in opening up about their perceptions regarding the program as well as to share their unique experiences within it.

Participants' demographics were a cross-section of ages, racial identity, and gender identity of college students at the site of research, and representative of California's rich

demographic makeup at community college levels in the higher education umbrella. The youngest participant self-reported their age as 21, while the oldest participant identified as a senior citizen of 67-years-of-age. Of the 16 students, five identified as “White,” which included students who are from Italy or Sweden. One participant identified as being fully Armenian. Three participants identified as “Latino/a/x,” which included voluntary self-reported ancestry from Mexico or Central America. Five participants self-identified as multi-racial, with two claiming Iranian and Armenian ancestry, one identifying as both Swedish and Filipino, one identifying as Black and Latina, and another identifying as Filipino and Armenian. Two student participants identified as Black, with one of the two also self-identifying as a Veteran who has served overseas with the United States Marines. Of the 16 participants, 9 were self-identified as male and 7 were self-identified as female.

The participants were interviewed in a neutral environment on the Oak Tree college campus from December 2019 through February 2020. A nondescript conference room was chosen as it seemed to be easily accessible to the participants, neutral of the learning environment of the program, and private and quiet in its location on the campus. The participants described their experiences during interviews, which were recorded and transcribed, and later coded to observe trends in participants’ experiences. Using methodological triangulation and interviewer triangulation, as discussed in Chapter 3, I combined interviewing and observations to enhance the validity of the results. In this chapter, I begin by discussing trends that were overwhelming across participants, including participants’ reported feelings about degree exploration and finding a niche major in which they felt supported, validated, and ultimately successful. Following a discussion of patterns in degree exploration, I focus on a thematic pattern related to engagement, which participants described as being a critical and

integral part to their success within the program and a reason that they were successful beyond program academics – specifically, in their chosen professions related to the program of study. Importantly, that success participants discussed was often described as being associated with social media use at the department level. To better understand social media at the departmental level, I explore the nuanced ways that student participants use social media, how social media use made them feel within the department, how the academic program leveraged social media, and finally how they described social media use by the college and across campus.

Participants' Social Media Use as an Essential Daily Routine

Student participants described the kinds of social media channels that they use, with 15 out of 16 describing social media as a necessary component of their life and part of their daily routine. In fact, they described checking social media first thing in the morning to stay aware of the news cycle, understand from key individuals – politicians and celebrities alike – what was important, keep in touch with family and friends through these channels, and described social media as a place where they can pass the time, stay informed, and find creativity. “It’s a pretty much a situation where it’s like a part of my daily life in how I use it and need to use it to stay aware,” one male participant in his 20s said. Another participant, an immigrant who described social media as integral to identity and connectivity, explained: “You can’t understand today’s humor or today’s young adult without social media. It’s a part of identity now.” A separate participant, a male veteran of color, said social media is critical to his ability to connect with people. “If I had to be honest, I spend at least two hours on social media a day,” he said. For the participants, social media is described as having an impact on what they think about issues and engagement with core aspects of those issues. For instance, a Latina female participant described social media’s essential nature in her everyday life: “I use it religiously. I wake up and

check Twitter, Snapchat. I don't use Facebook, but I use Instagram. I check the news, I check trends, I check politics. [...] I interact with friends and share things to express myself."

Like the student participant above, most cited Twitter as one of their favorite social media channels. Participants also cited Instagram as another preferred social media platform. A Black male participant described how social media helps him stay plugged into music and sports-related news, and mentioned Instagram as a platform where he stays on top of trends and Snapchat as one social media channel that he uses for more personal-based communication:

I use social media to follow musicians and athletes that I appreciate. I need to keep on top of the who is who so this is one way. I use all social media except for Facebook. Mostly I use Instagram as my top channel and Snapchat more as a personal social media channel. I check it several times a day.

While Instagram and Twitter were their top two social media channels on average, these participants also said they use Facebook and Snapchat to varying degrees, and, most recently, TikTok, a video creation social media platform has risen in its profile.

For the most part, however, student participants described using a combination of the currently popular social media platforms multiple times in a day to stay plugged into the current media landscape, stay abreast of issues, and to connect with their family and friends. To this point, one participant acknowledged the multi-faceted experience social media has to offer:

I would say like I use it to look at news to also find like insightful articles that sort of like changes your perspective and your thinking, and then just for you know just entertainment. So, I'll watch videos. I do the serious and unserious. It is important to me and a part of my every day."

Here, she described that social media is both for entertainment, but also for concrete thinking about issues. Another participant described the idea of being challenged on viewpoints. “You’ll see something that will inspire you to do something else,” she said, discussing how social media often impacts the kinds of columns and opinion pieces she will write. Yet another student participant, a female who identified as Latina and Black, explained she has gone on to work in the radio and media landscape, similarly explained the inspiration she finds on social media:

Social media is my bread and butter. I make money and monetize via social media. I could not be where I am without it. I check it every morning. Read everything I can on the entertainment circuit. I follow everything from the hard news we learned to follow in our program to politics and policy. I check sports. I see what the important people are saying. I use Twitter less though I should use it more. I am big on Snapchat and Instagram.

Here, this participant said that she could not get through her day without social media, and that her follower base expects to see insightful posts and updates from her.

As a counter-story to the general pattern that can be seen in participant responses, the only student participant that did not feel social media was relevant described himself as a keen observer on Twitter and said that he recognized social media’s benefits but cited the previous election circuit as the reason. Interestingly, the participant was the oldest in the case study group, but cited issues with social media’s dark side and potential election tampering. “I dropped out of social media in the run up to 2016 election,” he said. “I got very demoralized. I had been in a pretty cool Facebook group for musicians and it was how we stayed apart. Mainly I used social media to be able to keep in touch with friends and family.” He said he misses using social media but that not using it religiously helps him with his mental well-being. The

participant, however, was often showcased on the department's social media pages, it was determined, during site observations and actively played a role on the department's social media.

Perhaps one of the most interesting examples of social media use in participants is one where the student described having both a strong understanding of it, using it in limited ways but as part of his identity, while making sure he has a handle on his own well-being. The participant explained:

I use social media but I use social media in a somewhat limited way. I mean, I don't have many social media outlets, I use for my say, day to day. I use Instagram and Facebook. I took away my Snapchat. I guess I feel like you don't need that. I don't use Twitter. I feel like it's really taking a lot of my time so I want to limit it to my two favorites. Facebook, I still have because I keep in touch with family and friends through Facebook and Messenger, and then Instagram as well. Instagram is for expression. I use it as a way to express myself with photos, videos, and texts, so I use it more for expression. It's where I came out as bisexual, which surprised people because I had a female fiancé at the time.

The participant described how he had become adept at handling social media in a way that it did not interfere with his mental health, but instead was something he will use to broadcast information or share parts of his life in positive ways. As social media has become more omnipresent, people become more adept at using it, and almost all users explained social media in positive terms in which they expressed that it enhanced their daily lives.

Social Media Use and Participants' Motivation to Succeed Academically and Professionally

The case study analysis examined how the department used social media and how this specific department-level social media use seemed to motivate research participants in feeling

engaged, which studies have indicated is positively related toward student outcomes like completion of a program, graduation, and finding internships and jobs. In fact, student engagement is directly correlated with student success, which is oriented in students passing their coursework, hitting commencement goals, feeling good about their overall self, and finding work as a consequence of their education, as discussed in Chapter 2. Results suggested that student participants in the department felt engaged as a result of a “family-like” feel in a program that they said catered to them in how they communicate, particularly with its utility of social media, and supported different modes of learning by using it as a tool rather than disavowing it, which participants said was often the case in many academic settings. One participant explained the importance for instructors to understand that technology and social media are tools and should be embraced when possible:

Like, some instructors don’t realize that we are on our phones so we can be, you know, more aware of our world and civically minded. You know, I notice it in classes.

Everybody’s always on their phone or devices. They’re always looking up the terms used, typing up notes, they’re uploading or looking up files. They want to find out what’s going on around campus and be alert so they can succeed. And a lot of times it was our school paper’s social media that was, like, you know, the reason for that. Like the gas leak.

This student described learning about a campus evacuation through social media rather than an intercom service on campus or text service that he explained did not work, adding that it allowed him and his peers to warn one another and his instructor to get off campus. Further, the student participant stressed this particular episode as important, adding that the media department at Oak Tree posts aided him throughout the day during his career but was especially important when he

checked his phone during a classroom break. The participant also added that he does not use social media for any negative reasons but to stay “in the know” and that it was helpful when instructors trusted their students as adults to be mindful of technology use that includes social media. To this point, he added, that students are often parents, employees, take care of their parents, and should be respected to make a choice to check their technological devices so long as they are not aggressively using them for the purposes of fun and entertainment.

Student participants described the use of social media as being rooted in a maturity and awareness, echoing the aforementioned participant who suggested students be respected in how they utilize technology in the classroom. For example, another student noted that it was students who helped the instructor run the social media channels for Oak Tree Community College’s media department that supported issue updates. “We posted first when we were evacuated,” a female participant stated, noting that the news only later appeared on the official campus’ social media channels but that the department shared the time-sensitive information first. She continued: “That’s really good and I think it’s surprising because it’s not really our job to post for the campus. It’s good training for a media career.” The student participant added that technology was not a distraction for the program but that it enhanced the way students learned and provided valuable, real-world training to them. She also observed realities of many industries with how the internet impacts business and said that the program following “the path of online news” and “social media news,” expressing that “almost everything is going to go digital at one point.”

The participants readily discussed the changing landscape of the media, information spread, and a general shift across industries toward a digital landscape. In this vein, a student participant described the importance of technology in general and said she was surprised to learn

how many instructors don't allow it in their learning environments, calling the department's use of it unique and refreshing. She shared:

It was very like every single time, you know, the first class of every class they will always be, like, "this is a technology free classroom." And I would just sit there and be, like, "that doesn't prepare us for our future." Especially in Humanities. And I can't use technology, and I'm also a better note taker on a computer so that was kind of unfair to me.

She continued on to say that in the department, social media was a crucial need and contrasted the media department at Oak Tree Community College with most courses of study. "I think it was necessary because I use social media as a tool to build my articles into research and stuff like that. I would say it was surprising because the instructor didn't see social media or technology as a threat. That is not really common." The student expressed frustration with the way that many instructors have a "zero tolerance" policy where technology is concerned. All but one student regularly followed the department's social media and all but the one aforementioned participant who opted to steer clear of social media described the positive feelings that promotion of their work inspired. Participants, moreover, cited a few other pages associated with the college that made them feel like a part of the collective whole.

Ultimately, active social media presence of certain college channels, like Instagram and Twitter, appeared to translate to feelings of engagement for students. During site observations, I sought to understand where students interacted in the classroom and campus, how social media was being used in the department and for what purpose, observed students to see if there was a way to describe how social media made them feel and determine who participated, and sought to answer whether this use of social media was exclusive to the department.

During site observations, students appeared to behave the way traditional media personalities or journalists would in a newsroom, and some students would work to capture moments to share on social media for the department. I observed classroom work and interaction that was broadcast on social media and some of which was not. From site observations, students appeared like they were taking ownership of their work and seemed to behave professionally as they worked. These site observations showed student engagement and motivation, key thematic categories that became evident during interviews with student participants. The students seemed to collaborate with one another whether they were inside or outside of the classroom. As examples, many of the students would borrow cameras or video equipment to go complete their projects on campus, while some students remained in the classroom to layout student video, radio, or news platforms. In other instances, some students would also take publications to place around campus and, while doing so, would share social media videos and photos to alert the campus of new magazines or publications available.

Inside the classroom, the department appeared clean and welcoming, with stacks of newspapers and magazines that were tidy, an environment that was sanitary and decorated, and even a student couch and radio microphone spot equipped with cushions. During the months of October through December, filled with either Halloween, Thanksgiving, or Christmas and Chanukah decorations. During field observations, I noted that students and faculty held holiday parties or birthday parties to coincide with the end of student publications that took volunteer time from students on top of their normal work. During these sessions, students appeared engaged and active, and some student participants referred to these events during interviews. Of particular interest was the decorating process prior to Halloween, which took place toward the end of class or during the college hour where students do not attend class but can take a lunch

break. The decorating process was observed in early October and was shared on social media. At least eight students were involved, with many who had donated, made, or allowed the department to borrow their decorations. This process was one where students were seen laughing, getting creative and enjoying the task of decorating while sharing the outcome on social media.

In November, decorations for the Thanksgiving holiday and for autumn in general served as a backdrop for a food drive that students organized out of the classroom on their own accord, providing items to the college's Food Pantry. This, too, was shared on social media, and students took an active interest in making sure to post regularly by creating video, flyers, and social media engagement posts to persuade the campus to participate. Two student participants mentioned the initiative they took to help other students and referred to the November food drive.

During other site observations, I witnessed that students would put together their work during lab time of the department's programming, during office hours, or during lunch breaks, and that students would also designate two individuals each week to help with cleaning up after food was eaten and to make sure the coffee machine was cleaned at the end of each Thursday. The department, overall, appeared warm and home-like, with decorations, students working together to complete projects, and the department's rooms clean and neat, where students would often remain after class. Student participants described that they felt comfortable in the environment and that they wanted to be there past class time. In this environment, the student participants said they felt like they were in a second home, and also in a space where they were validated and supported through their work being showcased on social media.

For instance, one student described how the welcoming environment also shifted into the social media sphere for the department. “I wrote a lot and produced a lot, so I got mentioned often,” said a female participant, who also identified as a student of color. She continued:

I loved it and I think most would. It made me see what I did. It’s hard to see when you are working on it but when the professor tags you, it shows it very clearly. It shows your sense of teamwork and it shows what you produced. I felt really proud.”

Similar to this participant’s take, another female participant discussed how the motivation directly helped her to produce more work:

I think everyone likes recognition. But it actually motivates me in a sense to kind of want to do more, because I always go back to the carrot and the stick method, like, the more I get recognized for my things, the more I realize my content matters or what I do matters. It motivated me. I do think being posted about is helpful because I do know that we have important people following us. I do appreciate being showcased because that kind of makes me feel like I do have somewhere to go career-wise.

During the department’s classes, I observed during site visits that students would get mentioned and complimented during class, and that students would encourage one another by congratulating them.

Frequently, the department’s social media pages were left running on the projector, so that any real-time posts would come up. Students would be able to see their work shared on these channels. Another female participant echoed the sentiment that seeing her work shared was motivating: “It’s actually a really uplifting experience in knowing the instructor is proud of you and vocalizes it because I can’t remember other places where that happens a lot.” The student described how uplifting it felt to see her work shared on social media pages associated

with the department and how she enjoyed seeing her peers “like” or “favorite” her work. Yet another student participant, a male, expressed it differently: Social media in the department made us more like a community that transcends the class.”

Participants Seek Greater Engagement in Programs: Finding a Course of Study

A clear theme to emerge from data analysis pointed to student engagement at the department level as participants explored their major and eventually selected the media department program as a course of study. I explored this thematic pattern over the course of interviews in which participants discussed how they felt welcomed in the case study program and how they felt engaged within the program through the use of social media. Specifically, social media seemed to be a key factor in helping keep students engaged, with a third of participants specifically reporting that they found their current or ultimate program of study through degree exploration, which is exploratory course taking that allows individuals to find programs of study that hold the most appeal to them. One participant described how a counselor had encouraged her to take a media department class at Oak Tree Community College because of her interest in reporting and magazines. The participant added that the counselor advised her to take a media department class to make sure that it was something that she was actually interested in before committing. The student added: “I had no idea that we even offer these classes.” At that point, the student participant, who identified as an immigrant of Armenian and Iranian origin, said she had been on campus for a year and was still getting used to going to college. “I just don’t think I was really involved on campus that much at that point,” she said. She continued:

I certainly wasn’t following anything school-related on social media. And after finding out about the program and enrolling, that’s definitely when I started to become way more

involved in on campus things. I had never been part of a club or anything like that until I got involved with the media department.

In this individual participant's experience, it is evident that the department's open and familial nature, as described by participants, helped inspire a greater interest in campus life at the community college that led to feelings of inclusion, support, and greater engagement on the part of the student. The student participant cited feelings of belonging to the program and mattering as one of the reasons why he continued along his educational path to apply for graduation. He expressed these feelings over the course of the interview that the program made him feel "like I've accomplished something" and "like it matters," adding that at the end of his academic career, he felt "like I'm connected to school just a little more, whether it be emotionally or whether it be, you know, politically with ideas."

The notion of connectivity, emotionally and academically, within the department was stressed by all of the student participants. For instance, another student participant had a similar experience of degree exploration that took longer than the generally prescribed two-year window of community college attendance. The student, a Black male student, went on to transfer to the University of Southern California. The student explained: "I met a sports counselor who showed me the newspaper and I thought maybe one day I want to work in the industry of sports reporting so I came and talked to you." The student went on to describe the "big impact" being in the program made on his life. He said: "After taking the Media program classes I sort of realized that I could even go to USC and study business. I got interested in the Beats by Dre initiative. It opened my eyes, frankly." Once the student participants found that program, they remained because they felt like they were part of a "team" or "family," where their work was shared

routinely on departmental social media pages and made them feel greater “pride” and “motivation.”

The aforementioned terms – team, family, pride, and motivation – were almost abundant in nature as students described how they discovered and elected to remain in the program after feeling a unique camaraderie that went beyond the classroom into digital landscapes like social media. A separate student participant of Latino origin shared the following story:

So, I was a communications major. And my professor was like, oh you should take this media department class, you’ll like it. This and that. And then I came in here and I took it and then I remember the first week. I wanted to drop out just because I was like, this is going to be so much writing and so hard. I’m always like a person that leaves things to like last minute to do things. And I think that’s where I slacked off that semester, and I don’t know, I was doing everything last minute or I wasn’t doing work, and that cost me. I was showing up to class every day. I think I only missed two classes. I realized I actually liked it and if you do the work, it isn’t difficult and the classes are chill. And then I became a major of this program. Crazy huh? [...]

The participant delineated how he took serious ownership of his role within the department by becoming an editor of campus publications and described how recruitment was important in a program he described as beneficial:

We should try to get more kids to join us. It’s not hard. And if you ever need help, there [are] so many people here to help out. I just think it’s a badass class. Like, the environment is super chill … it’s just good vibes all around. I left and became friends with everybody. And when we first came in, it was just like really quiet, and nobody really spoke to each other. Only the ones that knew each other spoke. The kids that would come

in were shy. But then, by the end, we were all friends. Like a big family. I still try to hang out with the kids that were in that class last semester.

Moreover, the participant candidly discussed how he went from failing several classes because of financial realities imposed on him and his family to feeling like he was a part of something important and carving out the time to dedicate to it fully and completely. That, he said, was the impetus to doing more than was required for a classroom grade.

Another participant had a similar experience and highlighted feelings of belonging in the program, noting that the department celebrated classroom birthdays monthly and the instructor would bring food, as well as take class outside and keep students on their toes, all aspects that were reflected on the department's social media channels as well as many of the student participants. Discussing the class, he said: "It's not an 'easy A,' you know, but an 'A' grade can happen if you work and care, and most of us do because we are getting prepared for jobs. And, you know, that is what I tell new students. That's what makes me feel like I belong. Like a proud parent here after nearly two years in the program here." The student participant used the word "family" in multiple instances during his interview, which seemed to be an important feature of the program for him and to his overall development of skills and his success.

Though student participants described a positive environment, emphasized with what appeared to be happy and comfortable dispositions during the course of the interview, as well as emphasis on their successes since being a part of, several student participants described the importance of degree exploration to finding the program. Specifically, these participants described how they started taking coursework in the program for an elective, through degree exploration, or because a peer was in a particular elective course in the program reported that they switched their major to fall in line with program coursework because they felt nurtured,

motivated, and trained for the real world in a way that motivated them to continue with their degree plan and graduate. The aforementioned student participant described how he felt supported and how it translated to feeling validated on social media:

We are really a family here and we care and no one is out to get you. It's really a program that I feel truly made a difference in my life. I know that my work is getting read and is getting out there, and that, like, my work can help to inspire the younger students. And we all cheer each other on here like a family. On social media we cheer. And in person we also cheer one another.

From this story, you can see the potential relationship between student self-worth and desire to work hard in the program and inspire incoming students, using social media as an important tool to “cheer” and support students involved in the program. The participant, along with several others, described these feelings of inclusion as unique and motivating, key themes that came up amongst participants of the research.

Describing the familial feel of the class and the ownership he took of it, another participant, an international student of Swedish and Filipino origin, explained what walking through the halls of campus evokes in him even after graduating and moving on with his life and his career:

The first thing I thought today when I opened the doors here to the buildings is here is my second home. And like I mentioned, it's about family. You come in as a student, but you walk out with a family. That's how I feel. I mean, there's a lot of other stuff in between that you learn. A ton of stuff. And I, I still use that knowledge today.

In this story, the participant evidently felt supported by peers and comforted due to being in the program, which he learned about through his fiancé. In the last minute of his interview, he said:

“I am more successful academically and professionally, and I loved my experience. Life-long friends, the best teacher, and so much to learn here. That’s what I took.” During the interview, I observed that student participants’ body language was decidedly positive and open as they went on to highlight their personal experiences.

More generally, beyond this personal story, participants described their joy in coming back and walking past the old classroom, emphasized how they had seen product of the department on campus, and met up with former classmates and instructors. Participants also paused by a showcase glass wall in one of the building that contained student work, including some of their own, to snap photos on their phone. The participants also stressed their successes and vocalized the importance of the program in reaching certain educational and professional goals. During interviewing, I observed a sense of pride whenever student participants mentioned a “family feel” to the program, a key code that kept coming up over the interview process and an emerging pattern that showed student engagement with their peers and instructor. Several student participants sounded decidedly sentimental, going as far as to describe their contributions and discuss how they helped bring students to the program, such as an aforementioned student who called for more recruitment into the program. “We should try to get more kids to join us,” the student has said, with a demeanor that was excited with the prospect that came to him as he spoke of coming back as an alumni volunteer.

Finding a Course of Study: Engagement as a Collaboration in a Team or Family that Built a Valuable Skillset

A key component for the reason that participants switched majors or looked for one where they felt more comfortable appeared to be a lack of engagement in their coursework and majors. To this point, participants expressed that they found a more welcoming environment in the media

department program, and, in all cases, completed their course of study once they switched into the major. Simply put, they felt engaged in their studies and interested in their academic work because they found a team, a family, and something more than just a major – a skillset that they valued. “My educational path here changed to the Media so I’m very grateful for that,” one participant reported. This participant continued: “I had to drop out of my previous program,” another student said, noting the instructor wasn’t warm, did not praise students for large projects, and “students did not interact with one another” in his other program of study. That student described taking a course of study he was interested in but found that one of the main instructors was unnecessarily hostile to the point of infantilizing the class at one point and throwing “temper tantrums.” He added that as a 67-year-old who had come to college after skipping out on traditional academics and dropping out of high school 40 years prior, he did not take kindly to the attitude. Interestingly, the participant said the issue wasn’t the ease of the coursework. The “instructor would be really a Jekyll/Hyde character,” he said, adding that “she was a very difficult teacher not because of the subject matter but because of her character.” Ultimately, he found the classes he had to take with her too anxiety inducing and switched to the media department. In the new department, he found that teamwork, friendship, and collaboration were key facets that made it a welcoming program.

Teamwork or collaboration, which the participant above described, was a key theme that emerged in interviewing and specifically one that appeared to be important to all of the various participants who stressed the importance of working together in the program – a collaborative dynamic that they described as being unique for a college department. “We were a real team and homies with each other,” said a Latino male participant. This friendship and comradeship stretched into the digital sphere: “What I liked about our social media was that we connected to

each other and became friends on different platforms,” explained a white female student participant. Another student added that as a student with dyslexia and other learning disabilities, it is difficult for her to make friends but that she found herself doing just that in an environment she characterized as being reminiscent of a smaller liberal arts university despite being a program at a community college in California.

I am almost surprised, a smaller private college or the LA Times newsroom. So, people are a little bit more, like, you know, social and making friendships and stuff like that, as opposed to the one that I went to community college the first time where I felt like a similar program was very, like, cold and distant. It was like a team or like a family.

The participants described their interest in the program which they said grew when they realized the department had an exclusive feel to it, with participants explaining that it helped to make them feel engaged with the academic rigor of the department. That the program maintained a welcoming environment resembling a private higher education institution or private club with an exclusive family feel was universal in all interviews – a common theme among all participants that was clearly important to their interest in remaining a part of the program. These participants visibly opened up during the course of their interviews and seemingly demonstrated greater comfort in talking about the program. “I made the best of friends here in L.A.,” said an older than average Swedish/Filipino international student, referring to his former peers in the course. “There were a lot of friendships being made and a lot of, you know, people having fun,” a mature female student added, noting that when she transferred following completion of the program, she did not have nearly the same experience at a four-year higher education institution. She explained that this dynamic was not present at the four-year institution she currently attends. She continued by adding that the program at the college level seemed exclusive where she got far

more than she had ever assumed she would: “It feels like, I am almost surprised, a private university.” She stressed that she felt like she got much more out of the program than she paid for and that the level of support received ultimately made her feel included, important, and helped her to succeed in the program. Another student, a male international student, had similar comments:

I never saw anything like this program except maybe in dance in Sweden where we worked as teams. I think my wife and I always talked about how the department is like a family. It’s the best classes I ever took and inspired my second career into my 30s, and I made the best of friends here in L.A. I got more out of the experience than we paid for it. You can see here the overlap between what this participant shared and what others shared about the family-feel and immense support of the program.

For the participants, feeling like they were getting something more out of the program than a transfer certificate or degree was important to them, with the participants citing the skills, familial feel, support, and fun in an academic program they said helped to train them for better career prospects or prepared them to transfer to their four-year university of choice. The participants unanimously agreed that they felt the program had a unique feel to it. One student participant, a Black male who came from a background marked by familial uncertainty, summed up the feelings of engagement and motivation, describing how they graduated with honors, went on to get a job, and succeeded: “So, yeah I was pretty excited about coming to class. Like I mattered. Wow.” This student participant had previous experiences in higher education in which he felt unrepresented, he said, so the program was a special surprise to him and motivated him to pay more attention to his education over sports as a potential area for future career growth. An Armenian male student who went on to work in the film industry following his time

in the program described that the media department was ultimately one of the most enriching aspects of his academic or professional careers. “I believe that this was the best series of classes I took at the college and I mean that, he said. “I would not be where I am now without the classes. I never really felt involved, like in other classes, before I took these classes.” The feelings of involvement, the student participant described, made him come to school, learn, and succeed whereas in the past he felt unprepared and uninterested in traditional education.

These feelings of engagement were critically important to selecting a major in the department, participants explained. This idea was summed up by yet another participant, a female of Iranian and Armenian origin, who said her degree exploration took longer, not unlike other student participants who described how they came to the media department. “I guess college wasn’t a reality to me for a while, just because starting out I didn’t know what I wanted. I switched, like, completely, going from Biology to English,” she explained, describing that she came to learn about the media department when she spotted a student on campus documenting and reporting an important campus meeting:

Actually, I learned about it through Associated Students and social media. I saw the editor-in-chief at the time from two years ago covering our meetings. I was in the student office at the time and I was, like, that guy is taking photos and video. I saw it on social media and learned that way we had this program. I would not have known otherwise to look into it.

Here, the student participant noted the student was apparently actively involved and interested in what he was doing, and that the work he produced also gave her a desire to produce tangible projects in the same way. She decided to enroll in a class within the program and quickly found

an encouragement that she said she didn't know was missing. That encouragement, she explained, translated to her success:

I think it all goes back to that kindergarten class feeling even though we're not 5. This feeling of warmth we get in the program. And I think, like, for me just getting that from you was enough to show me a lot because, you know, in our program we can sometimes be very strict and unforgiving on due dates, but we are also a family. It wasn't an easy class and putting a publication together can be stressful but we balance it out with support.

We see it on our social media platforms and we make it fun even when we work.

The student participant stressed that she needed the “constant encouragement” from the instructor, and it was only in the media department that she felt like she had a personal mentor. “We're lucky in this program and those that come to it realize that fast,” she said. Ultimately, the student participant felt engaged, both in the program itself within he classroom and on its social media platforms, she said, which evidently made her take greater interest in her work and put in more effort.

Social Media Use at the Department Level: Using Social Media to Engage Participants

As the preceding section notes, student participants described how their engagement within the department also took place on social media, which influenced their decisions on a major course of study. Though still fairly new as a learning tool, all but one participant reported social media use in the department as being important to them. Specifically, students described social media and its use at the departmental level for the purposes of promoting and sharing student work as a generator for positive feelings, including pride and motivation. Participants described how social media use at the department level to promote their work, essentially their projects, was a great motivator and helped them feel like they belonged in the program.

The sense of belonging that student participants described was associated with the sharing and praise of their work, which was broadcast on social media for the department. To this point, one participant described the night and day scenario of how being praised and supported by the instructor. “To me it meant a lot. Like, I’d do a podcast and see it showcased and it felt like people liked my work. I was smart suddenly, and not just a dumb athlete who needs shut up and dribble.” The participant, a former student athlete, had a rough upbringing that included getting thrown out of his mother’s home before he was a legal adult when she found a new life partner and trekked into a dark period for the individual in which he experienced homelessness. Being recruited to play college basketball was a saving grace, but a sports injury forced a reckoning for him – whether he need to continue in school or drop out. He found a new program of study and learned he was academically gifted. For him, it gave him a new path. Getting emotional, the participant recalled: “It made a big impact on my life being in this class and in the program because before it I thought all there was is basketball. After taking the program’s classes, I sort of realized that I could go to USC and study Business Management. I got interested in the initiative started by Dre,” the participant said, referring to USC’s Jimmy Iovine and Andre Young Academy for Arts, Technology and the Business of Innovation. The participant added that coursework at the college within the program was the greatest single motivator. “It opened my eyes, frankly,” he said. Further, the participant noted that his work being shared on social media was the first time he ever felt like he was “school smart” and that he could do something that would put him on the map to a rewarding, innovative career. The participant was a self-described student of color who deeply felt that his minority experience was a disadvantage, but found what he called “acceptance” and “family” in the program, noting that it was willing to be modern, innovative, and meet him on his level of social media use. “I use social media to follow

musicians and athletes that I appreciate,” he said, continuing, “I need to keep on top of the news.”

This participant’s experience was not unlike other student participants, who often described in the course of interviewing that they belong to various minority groups and discussed the obstacles they faced because of it. “I transferred to a four-year institution, and I got a paid internship with iHeartRadio and also have my own show now,” another participant, a woman of color, described. “I have become a household name in the media. It is night and day from where I was just three years ago.” She went on to detail the challenges of moving to California, pursuing acting, facing discrimination, and eventually going to a two-year college to find a better path. Seeing her work shared on the program’s social media pages “helped to build followers and build confidence,” she said. “I think it was important to learn from my mistakes, too. Not everything I worked on was great in the beginning but you can see my progression in the media and as a woman of color who is in the field,” she said.

These reported feelings of engagement in research participants could generally not be separated from their academic and professional successes. Participants felt prideful about the program because of their success, even well after graduating: “You have to work hard but it’s worth it,” one participant described. “And, you know, that is what I would tell new students. That is what made me feel like I belong. Like a proud parent looking at the department after two years in the program.” Another participant echoed gratitude for the program and identified it as a major reason for their professional success: “I would not be where I am now without the classes I took here,” she said. “I never really felt involved in another class.” Other participants described the “training” for jobs they got and praised the program for preparing them for

transfer: “To be honest, I think I got more out of my college experience before transfer thanks to the program.”

In general, student participants felt motivation to produce more work, go the extra mile in their projects, and pushed them toward success during their time in the program as they saw their work being shared. During their coursework, students would produce assignments that would get shared on social media when they were complete to help inform the student body and staff alike on a variety of issues and news. Seeing their work published and broadcast made student participants feel motivated; that is, the students felt a sense of pride that encouraged them to keep producing work and to do so to their best abilities. One participant discussed that it was a “big deal” to see his work shared and helped him to feel engaged:

It felt great seeing it. I think it’s a motivator for most journalists. The big deal, I think, is having the word out there in the first place. You have an audience and your work is being appreciated. And it’s a pat on the back from the instructor so it means more. It kept me going. We produced one newspaper that was 24 pages and shared that online. My family and friends were pretty impressed. Sharing that kind of stuff feels good even if it’s a lot of work in the moment.

In all but one case, research participants ultimately reported that social media promotion of their work at the department level made them feel valued, important, and motivated to continue and perform even better work. Seeing their work shared and broadcast seemed to help participants to realize they had an audience. “Truthfully, it made me want to work harder and it made me feel more comfortable,” one participant explained. Another described feeling like their words were valuable: “I mean, when you share my work and it’s shared with thousands of people, it feels like I did my work right and that I have something valuable to say.”

Participants' body language and tone appeared to be positive and welcoming unanimously, with all echoing a sincere appreciation to the program because of how they expressed that they felt engaged, supported, and trained in a discipline that led to or will lead to job prospects. The participants offered praise of the instructor, the way social media was utilized in a novel way within an academic institution, and described a classroom where they made coffee together, brought snacks or enjoyed provided snacks, and shared social media postings that offered a glimpse of them working together or celebrating one another. Participants leaned forward during interviews, were expressive with their hand, spoke openly without couching their language, and appeared happy to speak at length. Most of the participants spoke with conviction about social media's value, its overall utility, and the changing landscape in how people conduct work and communicate in a technological age – namely with social media.

As a counter-sample, in one case a participant did not feel social media promotion was valuable, the participant explained that it wasn't negative either; instead, it was a personal choice not to be on social media due to the political climate that he deemed to be upsetting. "I guess I saw the logos to social media pages but didn't really bother," he said, adding that he chose to focus on the face-to-face engagement in class and didn't mind appearing in social media posts but that he was concerned about privacy and mental health issues surrounding social media misuse. The student, however, noted that while he was over the age of 65, he wasn't ignorant about social media and its power. He cited an example that shows social media isn't inclusive to younger adults. "Dolly Parton's challenge went viral and she's of my generation. We understand social media even if we don't use it the same way younger students do." The student alluded to a challenge prompted by celebrity singer Dolly Parton who posted an amusing grid set of photos of herself that would be profile photos for Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Tinder. The idea is

the images people project on the technology platforms. For all participants, despite the levels of social media use, there was an awareness and acceptance that social media is ubiquitous, necessary, and, that when used carefully, can be a useful part of their daily lives.

Department's Leveraging of Social Media to Motivate Students in Academic Success

Student participants explained that they appreciated the way by which the media department at Oak Tree sought to publish and put out regular student publications, like many higher education programs within the disciplines of communications, public relations, journalism, radio, television news production, and writing. A male participant of Armenian and Filipino origin explained how motivated he felt and praised the program as one that trains students beyond an introductory level. “This project and program are the best of its kind,” he said. “From our magazine to our newspaper, I think what we do here is really great and people like each other in our newsroom. It feels like the L.A. Times.” Another student participant, a female student with Armenian and Iranian ancestry, described how the program taught her to brand herself on social media:

So, I use social media as a way to showcase my work, as we learned in our classes here in the program. The idea of branding is really big and I am trying to create a website for myself as I transfer with my writing clips and design work. I see the value in all the PDFs we created now because I have a physical portfolio and I am making a digital one, too. So, I use social media to express the kind of work I do.

Here, this student participant describes their motivation to create a showcase of their work, which included department assignments to create physical and digital portfolios to help students brand themselves to potential internships, jobs, or transfer institutions.

The Oak Tree department focused on a convergence of media disciplines to help students create showcases, essentially portfolios, several participants explained. The students, who sign privacy release forms in the class before their name and work are broadcast, then have their work broadcast across social media channels and learn along the way how to create work that merits sharing. One male participant described how the program prepared him for transferring to a prestigious four-year university and for a career:

First and foremost, the main thing the program taught me was understanding the industry. That was helpful. And sometimes you get professors that are teaching theory. Our professor was teaching practice. We did graphics. We did Photoshop. I designed papers and video. And wrote on deadline. We did stuff for social media and PR related stuff. So, it was like pulling out teeth but going to a four-year university was the easiest transition. I knew how to do stuff my peers didn't because of the education I got. I think I'm just thankful for the program, and I'm thankful that I was a part of it. I think I have a lot of experience and knowledge now that most of my peers at the four-year didn't have.

In this student participant's description of transferring successfully and feeling prepared, we can see a clear example of student success that was born out of the program and derived through motivation to get through it successfully.

The participants voiced how the training they received in the department lead to confidence, a phrase that numerous participants used to describe how they honed their skills and felt more secure in the knowledge of the field of practice that they had gained. One female student participant who had previously had to leave school because of life challenges described how motivating it was to see their work posted in such a fashion and how valuable the support she felt was for her:

It definitely gives you confidence, especially if you're like I was when I started with the program. I wasn't very confident in my writing. And I think that the program having a social media showcase of everything just like makes you feel like more important in a way. Like, they're actually trying to get your work out there. It is something for you to share as a clip. It's actually a really uplifting experience in knowing the instructor is proud of you and vocalizes it because I can't remember other places where that happens a lot.

Another student, an immigrant to the U.S., explained the balance she found with the support. She noted that the program “wasn’t an easy class and putting a newspaper or magazine together can be stressful” but said that she felt “support” throughout the journey. The participant added that the support extends to social media. “We see it on our social media platforms and we make class fun even when we work,” she said.

In the interviews, it was clear that all of the student participants had faced an assortment of hardships in their lives, and all but the one student participant who does not use social media regularly described their appreciation with seeing regular social media updates about their work as well as enjoying the comradery and “family-like” feel through the technological platforms. Content beyond student work in the aforementioned projects also includes broadcasting guest speakers, posting college updates of note, and posting regular content like polls and behind the scenes photos or video. In interviews, student participants came back to the idea that the media department has a real “newsroom” or “communications firm” feel to it. During site visits, I observed patterns where students often worked with one another in a collaborative experience or worked alone if they needed to. There was a kitchen in the back of the class where students could pick up snacks or store food they brought from home, or take grab a coffee from the

coffeemaker. I observed that students were engaged and motivated, and that while much of those feelings were experienced in real time within the class, sometimes those feelings were amplified through posting on social media as events were unfolding in the classroom. For instance, the instructor would bring a birthday cake and some other food items, as well as encourage other students to bring food if able, for each birthday month in the classroom. One student participant explained: “Your mama will cook something for the class but now the instructor brings cookies and we bring chips and stuff. We’re just so tight in that way.” Another student participant noted how much this meant to his feelings of being supported and feeling appreciated. “I think it is something the instructor built with cheering,” he said about the program’s motivation. “We have birthday cake each month and we bring food to class.” During site observations, student birthdays were celebrated at the end of class with a cake brought in from the instructor, and snacks brought in from the instructor and students. Students in the class would share on their social media as would the instructor, marking both birthdays and celebrating a successful publication toward the end of the week. Students would ask for copies of the posts and to be “tagged” in these postings on social media, allowing them to re-share to their own followers on social media platforms.

In celebrations and in work production alike, the department seemed to utilize social media to motivate students in the program academically and socially by making them feel celebrated and validated, ultimately appearing to help them to feel more engaged throughout the 16 weeks they were enrolled in a course. This theme emerged in site observations. It also was evident during interviewing where students described feeling “engaged” and “motivated,” often using those words when they discussed the “home” feeling of the program where they were cheered on and embraced, though they stressed the professionalism of the program. To this

point, one female student participant, who had previously dropped out of high school and college, described both the hard work needed to succeed and the overall supportive efforts on the part of the department to make them feel engaged:

Honestly, I think it was just how much our newsroom had that home-like environment. The coffee machine in the back and the fridge. Our breakroom. Those kinds of things, for sure. How we're all friends on social media. The potlucks we have and when we bring in board games during the end of the semester were so much fun after all the work. So, I think that helped me open up more. It's an open place by default.

It is important to note, moreover, that the student participant described an environment that was free from bullying or belittling, and that this component was stressed from day one when they entered the program's course offerings, particularly because the media department enjoys enrollment from students who are self-identified as disabled and has clear goals that are delineated on the wall of the classroom which include a general code of conduct that student peers must follow.

The discipline in the program that participants discussed was done so with appreciation, and participants describe this approach when they discussed how the program straddled the lines between disciplined and fun. Indeed, participants noted that they worked hard but had a lot of fun through the aforementioned regular encouragement in person and on social media. One participant described the team dynamics which was both enjoyable but pushed her to be more disciplined:

I kind of learned how to be a part of a team, and how not to only worry about myself. I know that sounds kind of silly and sort of basic, but I don't think I'd ever been a part of such a like diverse team of people who genuinely just had one interest. I think the

majority of programs I've been in failed because it was more people focused on how to make individuals look good. Here we think as a team. [...] I think what I'll take away from this program that I learned how to work with different people and how to prioritize things above just myself – not just make myself look good. It's like we all became true friends and feel like a real family. I met a best friend in this program. I love the homey feeling of this classroom.

The same participant described how posting and showcasing her work on social media was another facet of the support she received:

It's motivating for sure. [...] And even though my work had been published before, this was very different. I got used to the idea of people reading my work in this program. I had never been a part of a program that worked to actually push my name out there and push my likeness. You know, the instructor would tag us in all the Instagram posts and things like that. It would force my work to get out there more and it made me want to do more. Is it weird to say I felt a little embarrassed but in a very good way? It's kind of like when a family member posts an old photo of you on social media and they're like, "oh, look at the way she's growing up! Look at what she's doing!" And you're like, "Oh stop it." But I am actually very grateful about it and it's actually a positive thing.

While social media may not be the direct influence in students' engagement in Oak Tree's media department, interviews with participants, such as the participant above, suggested that it can be a valuable tool in enhancing students' feelings of self-worth surrounding their work and projects, ultimately helping them feel like part of a team of friends or family.

The Intersection of Social Media Use and Instructor Personality at the Department Level

Social media appears to have helped shape how students engage with the media department at Oak Tree College. However, students unanimously discussed the impact that the instructor of the program had on them. A key theme to emerge in data coding was “instructor support,” where student participants discussed the professor of the program as being transformational in their lives. Community colleges are loosely coupled systems where individuals often control or run their departments and have some measure of autonomy in the classes they teach. In such scenarios, such as in the case study, it is possible that an instructor’s personality becomes a core component of success or failure. As one participant stressed, enrollment especially in elective coursework is often determined by the instructor: “I definitely think the instructor did a great job of making sure all of the students were comfortable and completely checked in, and that has a huge positive effect on the classroom. There are so many people here who are in the program because of the instructor,” she said.

While social media’s utility can potentially be replicated in other courses, instructor personality seemed to be a frequent factor in decision-making among students regarding whether or not they plan to take certain classes or continue in a course of study. One immigrant student participant who struggled in high school described the impact of the instructor and the courses had on him in the following way:

I believe that this was the best series of classes I took at the college. I would not be where I am now without the classes. I never really felt involved in other classes before I took these media department classes. So much was just technical and pointless, and unlike real life work. It was busy work. I think our classes were different because it was like a job environment to prepare you and you had fun learning, made friends, and felt

like a real family. There was food and candy and holiday parties in class. It was like high school meets your job. The instructor of these classes was different from most instructors and maybe if I had such an instructor like that when I was in high school, I wouldn't have been so quick to give up.

Here, you can see how this participant reflected on the value of the program, which he described as job-like, but also specifically mentioned the importance of the instructor in motivating him to continue with his education by specifically tying his experience to his high school education where he was less dedicated to his studies and a career path.

In a similar vein, another participant discussed how surprised he was by the instructor's personality and the program overall, explaining that the program's instructor was not what he had expected:

I think what's cool about this program is that I came in thinking everyone would be a nerd and then I get in and I meet everyone. I was like, wait, that's the teacher? It was different and not what I expected. Then I learned how to put together publications. And people here cared when it was my birthday and became my friend. At least for a while when I was in the program here I felt people legit cared about me.

Student participants described an instructor who changed their lives. "I found the best instructor with the program," one participant said. Another discussed that it's "hard to fail" with an instructor who is constantly there for you, gives out their personal cell number, and "truly engages with the student."

College's Social Media Use in Official Capacities: Lack of Relevancy and Currency for Participants

In the case study analysis, results from student participants' interviews shed considerable light on the college's use of social media at the official level. Student participants described the pages that they followed associated with the college, and invariably described active engagement with social media pages when they felt reflected in posts or interested in the subject matter. "I think the official college page has a lot of lulls," said one female participant. She explained that the college's main page even failed to report in real-time about a campus gas leak emergency and said that the infrequent and second-thought nature made her stop following the pages closely. "Our Rotaract page, which I am a member of, is really good because of the students in charge who keep it alive," she explained, describing on program and a handful of others that she deemed worthwhile to follow because of the kinds of posts, the fact the pages represented students, and the frequency of the information being shared. Similarly, a male participant seemed to confirm this pattern, saying:

I follow some programs here on campus. I follow student government. I follow the Humans page which is run by students with one faculty member's input, and I also follow the school media page run by this department, and, lastly. the Student Equity page. So, you know, I follow organizations here on campus that, you know, update me on what's new, what events are coming up, and, you know, there are some clubs that I follow, too. But I focus more on the bigger organizations that are student run so they know what's going on from our perspective as students.

You can see here that this participant explained why he tends to follow student-oriented or student-focused pages.

A common refrain from the participants was that not feeling reflected in the posts of a social media channel made them less likely to follow it at all or, if they did, to mute its posts. “So, I think most of the official college’s posts are an afterthought. The official college page seems, like, weak, I don’t know,” said one participant. Another student participant said that she checks the official college page, though she does not find a utility in it. “I look at the official page but there is very little there usually.” A few participants explained that they found no reason to follow the official pages at all. “No, I do not follow the official social media pages for the college,” said one participant, “I did follow the Art History club for a bit, but they I believe they’re different now [because of leadership] so they haven’t been using their Instagram in a while and I stopped following them entirely.” For the participants, regular frequency of posting is important, as they need to feel that they get something out of the experience of following a page. “I only follow the media department and sports,” said one student. “I think both are well done and they seem to post frequently enough.”

Frequency of posts and current of information appear to be critical, participants explained, but so too is the idea of a community and students being reflected in social media platforms. “I follow the media department and the dance club since I danced as a student,” said one participant. He explained that the programs both showcased students and reflected students in what they shared to build community. “By following, I feel like I am a part of the community and the school. I graduated last summer. I’m still as an international visitor and connected. My visa still connected to school so I am legally connected to the school, but also social-wise, I am connected because of social media. It’s important to me.”

A clear pattern across student participants was that if they did not feel reflected in social media of the official college, which was the case for all student participants, they were less likely

to engage in the college posts. For the official social media channel, that means the participants are less likely to engage in following, “liking,” re-sharing, or even closely follow the posts. Participants described a need to know what was going on around campus in real time or with some currency and a desire to see community-building through social media. For these reasons, student participants preferred to follow pages associated with the college but run independently by departments, clubs, or political and social causes or movements.

Summary of Thematic Results

Social media’s utility in a department program can have very real positive consequences on student output and productivity, research interview participants showed. These students were plugged into social media which is a necessary facet of the lives of people, and the department leveraged what has become a basic and integral part of daily life as a learning and engagement tool. Across the board, students felt engaged in the classes within the media department at Oak Tree Community College, but not at the college-level with official college social media. At the media department level, they reported feeling supported, cared about, motivated to work hard within the academic program, and engaged in the program, which appeared to impact their overall experience and successful completion of coursework. More broadly, at the college level, participants needed to feel themselves reflected in a social media presence and currency in postings – all to build and/or enhance a sense of community. Informing thematic results, key codes that came up over the course of interviews included “family feel,” “instructor support,” “social media as ubiquitous,” and “social media community building.” Some student participants described earlier educational experiences that were diametrically different and led them to nearly quit higher education entirely. One male participant shared that he felt shuffled

along and in classes with no real clarity and subsequently dropped out of college before he came back and found the department:

I just showed up to school, took some classes and that was it. I think seeing a counselor is always good. Some counselors, like, they want to help you out. Others just tell you things that are useless because they don't listen. So, I dropped out. It wasn't till I came back after I failed all my classes and dropped out that things got better. I was working two jobs and was making money. But then I decided to come back to school and I met with one of the counselors, who was a sports counselor. She was like feeding me all this information, and I was like, wow like this is helpful, you know, I wish somebody would have helped me out like this in the beginning. She was the only helpful counselor I ever had.

Another participant, a female, talked about a general lack of interest in her previous major and confusion about navigating college initially:

I didn't know who to talk with. I found myself in this media class accidentally, and I liked it. But then I decided to major in psychology. And then I came back to media because I didn't feel I was learning anything in psychology. But no one prepared me. Mostly I had to mess up on my own and discover stuff. I didn't know about resources like tutoring and clubs and stuff, and it took me a couple of semesters to really figure things out.

While the results focus on 16 students within a California community college program and represent just a small case study and are not generalizable to the whole population, the research can be built upon to see how social media's marketing in a program can be used as a learning tool and embraced by faculty and staff alike. That is, the results may be transferrable to other

institutional and program contexts and have implications for how programs integrate social media into curricular and instructional processes. Instructor or staff personality, however, could be a critical part of the engagement that students reportedly feel, as it often determines whether or not students stay in a program, the participants explained. In the next chapter, I will discuss findings derived from the results and focus on areas to build in the research as well as limitations of the study.

Chapter 5

Findings and Recommendations

In the previous chapter, I examined key thematic patterns that emerged through interviews with 16 student participants who discussed their time and experiences at Oak Tree Community College. The grounded theory case study utilized semi-structured interviews of participants aged 18 and older who had taken and completed a minimum of one course in the media department. The research study also leveraged site observations to enhance understanding about the program's effects vis-à-vis social media usage on the part of the department.

In this chapter, I discuss results from Chapter 4, some of which have the potential to impact the way community colleges and universities help to motivate and engage students to learn. As covered in previous sections, including Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, social media as a tool can impact the psychology of the user (Kavada, 2012; Marwick, 2013; Tuten & Solomon, 2015; Krishen, Berezan, Agarwal, & Kachroo, 2016), which led to a case study research framework to examine how a community college media department uses social media to engage students. The findings explained in Chapter 5 present an interpretive discussion of the patterns in social media use in an academic program to motivate students to succeed. The study's two research questions guided this discussion: How do community colleges currently utilize their official social media to connect with students and prospective students? How do social media practices of community colleges shape student engagement and student success? Using these research questions, I employed student engagement theory to explore patterns in student engagement via social media (Vygotsky, 1962). This chapter also offers recommendations for future research and practice, based on the case study results.

It is important to reiterate that this study involved a case study in which backyard research, which is a generally accepted and conventional approach in qualitative inquiry in the social sciences. In Chapter 3, I described the research triangulation methods leveraged in interviewing and observing. These methods aid in avoiding researcher bias, and included, but were not limited to, using a colleague (third-party) to recruit participants, interviewing participants off-site (on-campus but not in the Media Department), working with a researcher triangulation approach to data analysis in coding with my dissertation chair, and employing data collection method triangulation with interviews and observations.

While the results of the study hold promise in better understanding how social media can influence student engagement when leveraged by academic departments, the data sample of the research was 16 student participants. This sample size is consistent with standards in applied educational research in the social sciences—where transferability, not generalizability, is a key consideration in qualitative approaches. As such, it is not generalizable and future research will be needed to better understand engagement of students in the digital sphere, particularly social media platforms. As this area of inquiry is expanded, future researchers will need to contend with very real equity issues where students may not be able to afford devices like cell phones that make it possible to be on social media platforms. That may change the nature of how students engage with social media on the part of their academic programming and require researchers to provide technology in order to better understand this emerging phenomenon.

Summary of Results

In Chapter 4, student participants described the critical role that social media serves in their daily lives. The participants described the way that social media is important to them both in public and private facets of their lives. Indeed, among 16 participants, only one described

being wary of social media due to privacy concerns. Across gender and racial identity groups, the participants appeared to be emphatic about how social media allows them to stay on top of national trends, inspires their academic work, and makes them feel connected. The results, while suggesting a high level of importance with social media for the participants, are not necessarily generalizable because of the small sample size.

The stories that participants shared seemed to confirm findings from previous studies, in which emerging research pointed to the importance that the audience places on social media (Krishen, Berezan, Agarwal, & Kachroo, 2016). Participants described situations in which they woke up in the morning and checked social media, spending several hours a day in this mode of modern connectivity. One participant, who described wariness surrounding social media because of privacy, acknowledged that across generations, social media was becoming commonplace, pointing to the “Dolly Parton challenge” in the previous chapter and describing how someone who was over the age of 60 spurred those much younger to share amusing social media grid posts of what perfect profile photos would be on popular social media sites, like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic where “Safer at Home” policy was enacted across U.S. cities, famous violin virtuoso Itzhak Perlman, 74, began to share regular anecdotes and mini viral stories several times a week on his official social media pages (Itzhak Perlman, n.d.), showing the utility of social media across demographics. The student participant had his own reasons not to use social media regularly but deemed it important to emphasize the way that social media isn’t restricted to a specific demographic. Participants made a case for social media’s daily utility, and were also asked at length about how the use of social media on the part of the Oak Tree Community College department – of which they were part – affected them. Chapter 5 delves more fully into the way

student participants described social media in their daily life and the utility of social media in the media department at Oak Tree Community College through the shared experiences of the participants. In this final chapter, I examine the results of student participant interviews that hone in on the increasingly versatile nature of social media. Importantly, social media on the part of the college was loosely coupled (Weick, 1976, p. 4). Some departments and programs had more robust social media presences that participants described as beneficial and engaging, as well as motivating to participants. In the case study, however, student participants were less likely to follow official pages as closely as departmental ones, suggesting that the official college page was not regularly updated or engaging closely with students because the students did not see themselves in the postings and therefore found less utility in following the official pages.

Social Media in Daily Life of Students

In the course of interviews, participants opened up about their use of social media to follow celebrities and politicians alike and the way by which social media is part of their social life. They described what social media meant to them, and subsequently discussed how social media was used by the department. A key theme that was nearly uniform across participants is the essential and every day nature of social media, which they described as using as soon as they wake up in the morning. These habits the participants described was consistent with studies that suggested social media was rich in social capital (Rowley, 2008; Raza, Qazi, & Umer, 2016). That is, the impact of social media on an audience that discovers everything from products to politicians through various platforms cannot be understated (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009).

To better understand how participants' experiences were shaped by social media use at the departmental level, I asked them to share what social media means to them and the utility of it in daily life. For the participants, social media is critical, which follows the literature review

section that examined the increasingly commonplace nature of social media. Literature examined in Chapter 2 noted that social media was becoming increasingly common among users of all ages (Goode & Woodward, 2016; Van den Bergh & Behrer, 2016; Tysjac, 2017). Student participants particularly enjoy using Instagram and Twitter, but most use Facebook and Snapchat as well. Some have started using TikTok, which has gained in popularity since last year but is rife with privacy concerns as it is a platform incorporated in China (Matsakis, 2020). However, the participants did not mention TikTok in the same breadth or find it as important as more mainstream social channels – the big four: Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter. Yet the mention of TikTok, even in passing, indicates that social media channels have the capacity to change over time. The participants who shared what social media meant to them touched on how it has assisted in their professional lives and helped them personally. Anecdotes from participants also include working professionals, who deemed social media to be a revenue stream. These participants, moreover, see social media as such an important tool in their daily life, that to them it has become essential in nature.

Department's Use of Social Media Platforms and Student Engagement

When looking at how social media practices of community colleges shape student engagement and student success, student participants had much to share about the way that the Oak Tree Community College made them feel, describing experiences that were transformative. One key thematic pattern related to social media community building and how social media can impact motivation, which aided in students' overall feelings on engagement in the program. Social media, for these participants, is a tool for engagement, a key theme to emerge from the research – one that relates directly to my theoretical framework on student engagement in higher education and student success (Vygotsky, 1962). The results point to how a digital space can

facilitate student engagement by affirming students and building community – suggesting that Vygotsky’s research conducted in a physical higher education climate on meaningful engagement can also have transferability into the digital landscape in higher education.

For the participants, seeing their work shared, their birthdays celebrated and feeling validated with pictures and video of them shared onto the social media channels of the department helped them feel included, supported, and part of an overall team. Several students described how this inclusion allowed them to find lifelong friends, even though the college, like others, is a commuter institution where students don’t stick around long after class. The word “motivation” associated with social media at the department level was one that came up during various student participant interviews, a theme that they associated with their willingness to try their best in the program and what ultimately helped them in their academic success. In fact, some students described changing their major and joining the department because of its tendency to think outside-of-the-box, student participants described, citing how it used social media as a learning and community building tool rather than an entertainment driven one. In the previous chapter, I showed results that indicated students associated words like “family,” “together,” “homey,” and “home” to describe the “family-feel” of the program. In fact, student described the environment as one that was like a real home. These student participants described how they further moved toward friendship with their peers and how social media became a vehicle of community support during the often-rigorous coursework.

Social media platforms run by the instructor seemed to humanize the coursework to student participants and made them feel like a part of a community, which aided them overall in feeling engaged and supported. Student participants also cited how the department’s social media use helped them to feel motivated in the course or courses they took in the department,

explaining the encouragement they felt through seeing their work being shared and seeing praise from their instructor on social media platforms run through the department. Many student participants credited the motivation they got from the instructor as a key facet to their desire to work harder in the course and challenge themselves. Friendship and teamwork were key themes that emerged during interviews with participants. Students described that friendship and teamwork were only enhanced through social media posts on the part of the department. Students belonged to a department oriented toward groupwork, and explained they appreciated the sense of comradery they got naturally that was supported with social media posts. Student participants explained that they felt they were encouraged to be friendly, which is not always the case at a community college. For the student participants, that kind of comradery with one another and teamwork helped to get them more actively involved and engaged on campus overall.

Discussion of Results

With respect to the first research question – how community colleges currently utilize their official social media to connect with students – the results presented in Chapter 4 indicated that colleges utilize their official social media to connect with students – but at varying degrees of efficacy and frequency. One potential reason for this may be community colleges are unique institutions because they serve an important public need but are slow to change and loosely coupled (Kezar, 2001). Students described that community college departments had varying levels of competence and versatility in social media platforms that they ran. Individual pages could be good, depending on who ran the pages and the level of activity on them, the participants explained. However, participants unanimously agreed that the official campus pages did not reflect students and were therefore less worthwhile to follow. In contrast, they described the

content presented and the opportunities to learn about campus events and see what peers were up to on some select department pages that they thought were worth engaging with. Ultimately, one crucial theme was that good social media pages run by college departments were worth following and these pages helped students feel connected, supported, and motivated. The students saw themselves in these posts. Student participants expressed that these pages helped them to feel validated by sharing information and news that mattered to them, reflected by the kinds of social media stories being presented where they saw themselves and their peers being showcased, and supported so that they knew about latest news and information that could be relevant to their education or extra-curricular activities, including social and political efforts that they were involved with. Sharing on social media, moreover, appeared to have a utility in the case study, which is consistent with previous research (Ferrari, McCarthy, & Milner, 2009; Kane, Alavi, Labianca, & Borgatti, 2014).

The second research question explores how social media practices shape student engagement and success, which for students can ultimately mean program completion, transfer, and career readiness, using the theoretical framework of Vygotsky (1962), which suggests that meaningful student engagement leads to success. In the case study, social media usage on the part of the department supported meaningful engagement beyond the physical space into the digital one. In the case study of the department that leveraged social media, the results indicated that social media was an important resource to help students feel more motivated during their time in the media department's coursework at Oak Tree Community College. Specifically, student participants framed motivation in the way by which their work was shared on social media, the behind-the-scenes social media stories on the part of the department, and the homey and collegial feeling that happened face-to-face and was reaffirmed through social media

connections. Students participants appeared vibrant and excited about sharing the way that social media made them feel, which fell in line with the literature review section research that examined how social media is tied to validation (Rinaldo, Tapp, & Laverie, 2011).

Social media, the results in this study suggest, is a tool to be explored on the part of departments in higher education institutions, as students are tapped into and present on social media. What we know from previous research, the majority of students in college, centennials and millennials, use social media regularly, with the former demographic being defined as “digital natives” (Pew Research Center, 2018; Tysjac, 2017). The research shows that students are actively present on mainstream social media pages, which has previously been pointed as a probably eventuality by researchers (Mbodila, Ndebele, & Muhandji, 2014; Goode & Woodward, 2016; Van den Bergh & Behrer, 2016). In interviews in this study, student participants demonstrated an expectation that social media would be used on the part of their institutions. They went so far to describe faculty that had issues with social media and technology as out-of-touch and too firmly entrenched in an old-school mode of teaching. For these participants, they described that social media enhanced their feelings of belonging and motivation to succeed, which led students to feeling engaged in their academic work. However, student participants also cited the importance of the instructor’s approach and explained that it also played a role in their engagement. The results in this case, while limited to the 16 student participants, study suggest a utility in using social media, but also stress that other external factors, such as faculty personality, can play a vital role as well.

Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

This research study sought to address a gap in knowledge on the impact that social media can have in academia – namely higher education institutions – and served to help address some

of the gaps in practice related to new media usage in academic programs, adding on social media focuses more on business and psychology (Kavada, 2012; Marwick, 2013; Tuten & Solomon, 2015). The results suggested that social media had considerable impacts on student participants in Oak Tree Community College's media department. Specifically, results point to impacts on students who described the validation and motivation they felt through seeing themselves reflected and showcased on the department's social media channels. The results also suggested that these impacts can be positive, which can mean greater levels of student engagement and student success. However, limitations in the study do exist and go beyond the small sample size of 16, which is not generalizable to the full population of college students. For instance, the student participants described the unique instructor of the program, who they felt was open-minded enough to utilize technology in novel ways in the classroom. Also, disciplinary differences may shape how programs can use social media. In a media department class, usage of social media may work. In a math class, it may not work in the same way. Importantly, the case study participants are also a part of a Media Department, which tends to be an important social fabric of most colleges and universities. Media Departments and Journalism Departments tend to offer a sense of belonging and stress comradery between students, faculty, and staff, and this particular discipline can also be further studies as conduit which often helps to retain students to the college as well as spread college messaging.

In March 2020, COVID-19 forced academic programs and department to reexamine how to keep students engaged with the campus, impacted a greater need for student awareness of the constant changes impacting education modes, and shifted the way that the departments teach and engage in outreach with students. Some instructors, at a time where students are not on campus, may find ways to leverage social media and motivate students based in part of the research

contained here. As a free tool that students are already on, it provides a low-cost and effective way to reach students beyond email. It is worth noting that social media companies have seen an enormous spike in social media usage as a result of the pandemic. Usage of social media has combatted social distancing with being social at a distance. COVID-19 and the use of social media at various college departments can be an interesting case study to better examine a college when it is currently isolated from face-to-face instruction, likely through the Spring of 2021. Just for a quick point in comparison, it is worth noting Snapchat saw a 20% growth in the immediate aftermath of quarantine (Winck, 2020). Student clubs and events shifted online, some to social media, and engagement that used to happen face-to-face is now virtual for nearly every course offering. There is much to study in this area, as the situation that has arisen provides isolation from face-to-face education and could provide a comparison with the case study analysis of this research. Furthermore, beyond potential research that can examine COVID-19's remote modalities and student engagement to compare with this case study analysis, it is worth noting that 16 participants is still small number and would need to be expanded in future research, as it is not generalizable. Should future studies be conducted on the subject, researchers may have to contend with economic disparities of students who do not own cell phones and therefore are limited in their social media usage.

The findings from this study offers several recommendations for practice in academic programs in community colleges. First, it confirms earlier research by establishing the considerable impact social media can have on a student's performance in college, a notion first suggested less than six years ago in emerging research (Kane, Alavi, Labianca, & Borgatti, 2014). It helps to reestablish that a whole generation of individuals entering college have grown up as the most technologically savvy and digitally aware generation that has ever existed (Van

den Bergh & Behrer, 2016), with all of the younger student participants in the case study analysis ranking social media as a critically important facet to their daily lives and identity. Early research from nearly a decade ago explained that educators, staff, and administrators could be missing out on the utility of social media platforms where so many student-aged individuals were posting, absorbing, and reflecting their selves (Rinaldo, Tapp, & Laverie, 2011). Even the World Wide Web 1.0 version of social channels – if not social media, per say – such as AOL chatrooms, Geocities pages, instant messenger or ICQ, and, later, MySpace demonstrated efficacy of these digital pages on student output, according to some nascent research that emerged around the DOT com boom (Washenberger, 2001). This case study analysis explored how social media usage on the part of an academic department impacted the participants. For the student participants, engagement seemed to translate to success – chiefly completion and graduation from the program.

Much of the current research on social media and higher education looks at the utility of social media, namely, how it can be used in recruitment and retention, though researchers point that colleges and universities need to be more aggressive in their approach to using the many free tools that exist and students are regularly using (Gerlich, Browning, & Westermann, 2010). Gerlich, Browning, and Westermann (2010) found that there is a growing expectation on the part of students that social media will be leveraged on the part of institutions, which could mean higher education will have to step up recruitment tactics on social media sites and social media engagement. From a business perspective, the students' expectation to see social media being leveraged means colleges will need to tap into a more robust comprehension of how to promote content on a digital marketing field (Rowley, 2008). Part of that marketing could happen naturally and organically with programming and departments at the college. The more natural

the marketing is, furthermore, the more it could ultimately allow a tech-savvy college-attending audience to feel like they have a psychological and natural engagement with the brand (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2016). In the case study, students described that the use of social media was fluid in the program and made them feel represented, and proud, and that other students were seeing those posts and reacting favorably to it. In site observations, students naturally progressed to using their phones to share snippets of their work, their interactions and social engagement in the classroom, and were also more likely to share the work of their peers. Students appeared joyful, excited to be in class and working within the Media Department, and present in their studies, as described in Chapter 4. According to the participants, the “positive” and “homey” vibe made the program stand out and get noticed by other students, faculty, and staff, including administrators.

Ultimately, the results of this study emphasize a great deal of utility on the part of social media by an academic department, but more research is needed to help establish a greater understanding. In future research, more students can be interviewed on the subject for a greater and more robust understanding of the ever-growing role social media plays in higher education. This research study is merely a first step toward addressing a gap in a subject matter that will become more important as online curriculum becomes more regular and institutions grapple with providing students with engaging opportunities beyond textbook learning.

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Appendix A: Participation Invitation Letter

Dear Invitee,

My name is Reut Cohen. I am a doctoral student at California State University, Northridge. I am seeking participants in my doctoral research study, entitled, “Social Media Marketing at the Community College Level.” Specifically, I am asking for your participation in the study, which seeks to inform higher education about how social media usage by college department impacts student engagement (Ferrari, McCarthy, & Milner, 2009).

Participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any point, even during the interview stage. The study is totally anonymous, and therefore will not identify you by name and take care not to disclose any other potential identifying information. If you would like to participate in the study, please carefully review the Informed Consent letter below. After you submit your Informed Consent letter, you will be contacted to set up an interview.

Your involvement in the study is of great benefit to this research and provide valuable insight in higher education for how social media can be used as a valuable tool.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Reut Cohen, Doctoral Student, California State University, Northridge

Appendix B: Consent to Act as a Human Research Participant

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Exploring How Social Media Marketing Practices in Community College Academic Programs Shape Student Engagement is a study conducted by Reut Cohen as part of the requirements for the Ed.D. degree in Education Leadership. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything that you do not understand before deciding if you want to participate. A researcher listed below will be available to answer your questions.

RESEARCH TEAM

Researcher:

Reut Rory Cohen

Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

Michael D. Eisner College of Education

18111 Nordhoff St.

Northridge, CA 91330-8265

(818) 590-0703

reut.cohen@my.csun.edu

Faculty Advisor:

Nathan Durdella

Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

Michael D. Eisner College of Education

18111 Nordhoff St.

Northridge, CA 91330-8265

(818) 677-3316

nathan.durdella@csun.edu

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study is to determine how students respond to social media usage at departmental levels, specifically the media department at the aforementioned Los Angeles-based community college. Students will participate in an interview of up to an hour. Students will share their experiences within the department as it pertains to social media usage and their feelings of being a part of the program, college, and how it affected their overall performance.

SUBJECTS

Inclusion Requirements

You are eligible to participate in this study if you are 18 years or older and have taken and completed at least one class in the media department or are a director of communications at a community college in California. Students can be current or former students.

Exclusion Requirements

You are not eligible to participate in this study if you have never taken and completed at least one class in the media department.

Time Commitment

This study will involve approximately 30 minutes to an hour of your time.

PROCEDURES

The following procedures will occur: You will complete a survey to determine eligibility. After which, you will be contacted to potentially participate in an interview that will last up to an hour of your time. If you consent, you will be given a form to read and sign.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

The possible risks and/or discomforts associated with the procedures described in this study include mild emotional discomfort and a small risk of embarrassment. That is because questioning can prompt responses from participants that touch on some discomforts encountered in daily life, such as the stress of college success, concerns about the future, sense of belonging and so on. However, being in this study does not pose a risk to safety or wellbeing. To minimize risk, participants will be reminded that they can opt out of the study at any time, and for any reason at all. This study involves no more than minimal risk. There are no known harms or discomforts associated with this study beyond those encountered in normal daily life.

BENEFITS

Subject Benefits

The possible benefits you may experience from the procedures described in this study include discussing your thoughts and concerns regarding the use of social media in higher education and how it impacted you, and help you reflect on those potentially positive experiences.

Benefits to Others or Society

Your involvement can shape the way social media is used by other departments and institutions.

ALTERNATIVES TO PARTICIPATION

The only alternative to participation in this study is not to participate.

COMPENSATION, COSTS AND REIMBURSEMENT

Compensation for Participation

You will not be paid for your participation in this research study.

Costs

There is no cost to you for participation in this study.

WITHDRAWAL OR TERMINATION FROM THE STUDY AND CONSEQUENCES

You are free to withdraw from this study at any time. **If you decide to withdraw from this study you should notify the research team immediately.** The research team may also end your participation in this study if you do not follow instructions, miss scheduled visits, or if your safety and welfare are at risk.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Subject Identifiable Data

All identifiable information that will be collected about you, either written and recorded information, will be removed at the end of data collection.

All identifiable information that will be collected about you will be removed and replaced with a code. A list linking the code and your identifiable information will be kept separate from the research data. That list will be kept under lock and key through a password protected account with the primary researcher. It will be destroyed after the dissertation is submitted in its entirety.

Data Storage

All research data will be stored on a laptop computer that maintains encryption software.

Audio recordings will be stored during transcription and then be destroyed after data is transcribed.

Data Access

The researcher and faculty advisor named on the first page of this form will have access to your study records. Any information derived from this research project that personally identifies you will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without your separate consent, except as specifically required by law. Publications and/or presentations that result from this study will not include identifiable information about you.

Data Retention

The researchers intend to keep the research data until analysis of the information is completed and then it will be destroyed. This means that after transcribing audio and assigning a number to each subject, recordings and names will be destroyed so the information cannot be connected back to the subject.

Mandated Reporting

Under California law, the researcher is required to report known or reasonably suspected incidents of abuse or neglect of a child, dependent adult or elder, including, but not limited to, physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse or neglect. If the researcher has or is given such information in the course of conducting this study, she may be required to report it to the authorities.

IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS

If you have any comments, concerns, or questions regarding the conduct of this research please contact the research team listed on the first page of this form.

If you have concerns or complaints about the research study, research team, or questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research and Sponsored Programs office, 18111 Nordhoff Street, California State University, Northridge, Northridge, CA 91330-8232, by phone at (818) 677-2901 or email at irb@csun.edu.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION STATEMENT

You should not sign this form unless you have read it and been given a copy of it to keep.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question or discontinue your involvement at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled. Your decision will not affect your relationship with California State University, Northridge. Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this consent form and have had a chance to ask any questions that you have about the study.

I agree to participate in the study. I understand part of the interviewing process will be recorded.

- I agree to be audio recorded
 I do not wish to be audio recorded

Participant Signature

Date

Printed Name of Participant

Researcher Signature

Date

Printed Name of Researcher

Appendix C: Student Interview Protocol

The experiences of community college students within a media department at Oak Tree Community College (a pseudonym) to understand how students respond to social media usage.

Student Participants

I. Pre-interview Session: Welcome, introduction, and background

Welcome and introduction:

Good morning/afternoon/evening. I value your time and thank you for being here to speak with me today about your experiences within the media department.

Purpose of the interview:

As you saw from the Informed Consent document and as we discussed, this interview will be conducted to collect information for a research study that focuses on how students react to social media usage at a college department level. During our interview, we will talk about your experiences as a student in the department, especially as it pertains to your work being showcased and your overall feelings about social media being used at the college department level.

Confidentiality:

Please remember and be advised that any information will only be used for the purposes of this research. You will remain completely anonymous. Identifiable information about you will be omitted. I will be looking at and aggregating results from all interviews. Information you share will not be attributing to any particular person. You will not be identified by name, any other personally identifying information in any report or document. We will be recording today's interview session for the purposes of accuracy. I will also be taking notes

of the conversation. The audio recordings will be transcribed in order to analyze information. The audio recorded file will be stored in an encrypted method until it can be transcribed, after which it will be destroyed. As for the Informed Consent form, only my dissertation and I will have access to the files and notes. These files will only be accessed with complete confidentiality. Your name or other personally identifying information will not be used in any published or public reports.

Informed consent:

As you read in the Informed Consent, you may decide not to participate in the research at any point at no penalty. Your participation in this interview is voluntary and there will be no payment of any kind for your time. You can refrain from responding to a specific question or answer in any way you choose. You can ask for recording to be stopped at any point and can leave the interview at any point for any reason at all. There will be no negative ramifications for you if you choose to do so. By participating, you are not waiving legal claims or rights. Please review the copy of the Informed Consent that you signed in front you. If you have any questions, let me know.

Timing:

Today's interview will last between 30 minutes to an hour. Are there any questions before we start?

II. Interview Session

Demographic and Background Questions

1. Describe how you identify in terms of racial background and identity. [demographic questions; Research Question 2]

2. Describe your family college and university attendance. [Demographic questions; Research Question 2]
 - a. Did your parents attend college? [Demographic questions; Research Question 2]
 - b. Do you have any siblings who are older than attend college? [Demographic questions; Research Question 2]
 - c. When did you decide to attend college? [Background questions; Research Question 2]
 - d. Did you feel prepared to attend college? [Background questions; Research Question 2]
 - e. Does your family life support your college aspirations? [Background questions; Research Question 2]
3. Describe how you use social media on a given day. [Background questions; Research Question 2]
4. Describe how you started to take classes in the media department. How did you find out about the department? [Background questions; Research Question 2]
5. Had you seen any social media from the department prior to enrolling in the class? [Background questions; Research Question 2]
6. Do you follow any official pages from the college on social media? Which ones? [Background questions; Research Question 2]
7. How would you describe the social media channels you follow at the college (assuming you do)? [Background questions; Research Question 1]
8. Did it surprise you to learn about the level of social media usage in the department? Why or why not? [Background questions; Research Question 1]

9. How does it feel to see your work showcased on official departmental community college social media platforms? [Background questions; Research Question 1 and 2]
10. Have your parents or family taken pride in your work by re-sharing on social media?
[Background questions; Research Question 1 and 2]

Appendix D: Semi-Structured Observation Guide

Program: Media department

Observer: Reut Rory Cohen

Observation Dates: September 2019 to December 2019

Location: Media department classrooms, campus events

Background

This observation guide is a supplement to digital observations of the media departments' social media channels and environment. There are opportunities to listen to conversations about the program's social media usage, as well as view students engaging with social media in the classroom. There are constraints, however, in that not all of the social media of the program occurs during class time or within the media department classrooms.

Purpose

To better understand the social media of the media department program and observe the use of it in real-time.

Observational Guide

Social Media in Use

- How are students using social media in the classroom?
- What are the inferred educational aims, objectives and expected learning outcomes of the activity?
- How is social media expected to help their learning for the course which it forms a part?
- How and from whom they can get help if they need it?
- What learning resources they can use to help them do the activity and where/how they can get access to them?

- What is the relevance of the learning beyond meeting the assessment requirements, particularly for potential future work?
- Who is taking part?
- Number of participants
- Nature of the activity and teaching approach
- Timing and location of the activity
- What resources made available to students?

Student Engagement

- How are the participants behaving?
- How are they undertaking the activity?
- How are students using help and resources?
- How are students interacting with the digital learning environment?
- What is the extent and nature of online activity?
- Do students appear more motivated, engaged, or better prepared?

Student Interaction

- How are the participants interacting?
- Is there dialogue?
- Is the dialogue constructive for learning?
- Who is talking/listening?
- What is their body language/non-verbal information?
- Is there evidence in the dialogue that students are learning?
- How are students learning from the dialogue?

- Is there evidence in the dialogue that academic staff/support staff are responding to students' learning needs?
- How is feedback being given to students?

Impact on Students

- What is the evidence that students have achieved expected learning outcomes from their behavior and dialogue?
- What is the evidence that students have achieved expected learning outcomes from their level of achievement?