

STUDENT ATTITUDES TOWARDS DIGITAL ADMISSIONS MARKETING

by

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies at George Mason University

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my loving family, friends, and my husband, Justin. Without you, I would not have had the constant motivation to complete this work.

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I would like to thank my family, husband, friends, and university supporters, all of whom helped make this possible. I would also like to thank Dr. Kelly Schrum for believing in me, as well as my committee members, who all provided invaluable insights into this research.

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ABSTRACT

STUDENT ATTITUDES TOWARDS DIGITAL ADMISSIONS MARKETING

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This thesis examined student attitudes towards receiving digital admissions marketing materials, and what influence these marketing efforts had on their decision to apply to a specific school. The study focused on overall attitudes concerning digital admissions marketing, and explored specific aspects of admissions email marketing that participants found to be more or less influential. A diverse group of students was selected for individual interviews using a purposeful sampling strategy to engage potential participants that fit the study's eligibility criteria. Participant responses were examined within the framework of Chapman's (1981) model on student college choice, and Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model of college choice, with a specific focus on the search phase.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The term “marketing” has many meanings, but Kotler and Fox (1995) offer a complete definition as “the analysis, planning, implementation and control of carefully formulated programs [and messages] designed to bring about voluntary exchanges [and] achieve organizational objectives” (p. 6). Wright (1995) offers an even more simplistic explanation by defining marketing as “to offer for sale” (p.11). For colleges and universities, one of the key institutional objectives is to engage students to foster interest and, ideally, “sell” students on their institution, prompting prospective students to complete and submit an application for admission. Marketing within the higher education environment is predominantly focused on relational and reputational marketing techniques, which seek to create, cultivate, and enhance relationships between institutions and students, as well as other constituents or decision-makers, in order to prompt certain actions, such as submitting an application for admission (Clayton, 2007). Lay (2004) therefore notes that “college student marketing describes the organized efforts to advance a college’s mission and goals through targeted communications and the recruitment, selection, and retention of students whose capabilities will contribute to their own development and that of others” (p. 4). In order to understand the higher education marketplace, Huddleston (2000) writes, institutions “should obtain data concerning students who apply [...]; the data collected [should] serve as a springboard for the

employment of strategic marketing plans” (p. 67). As such, marketing has become the tool through which postsecondary institutions, and specifically enrollment and admissions offices within those institutions, connect and engage with potential students.

The need for marketing within the education sector is emphasized by Optlaka and Hemsley-Brown (2004), who note that “educational marketing is an indispensable managerial function without which [a] school could not survive in its current competitive environment” (p. 6). While these authors refer directly to private secondary institutions in the United States and the United Kingdom (p. 5), their statements are also applicable to postsecondary educational environments, especially when one considers that there are more than 4,700 degree granting institutions in the United States, all of which are competing for the same pool of students annually using various marketing techniques (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). What constitutes effective marketing strategies, and how students perceive institutions based on the information they receive through these communication channels, however, is less clear. The increasing demand for higher education, combined with an enhanced arsenal of marketing options, have prompted universities to rethink their basic assumptions about student recruitment and marketing strategies in order to remain competitive in the evolving marketplace (Hanna, 1998).

It is from this transformation that my interest in this topic stems. As an admissions professional within the field of higher education, I interact regularly with students who may have been influenced by digital admissions marketing. Those interactions raise several questions: How are students interacting with emails sent by

universities? Are they effective? Why or why not? These questions are frequently asked within the field of college admissions, but, to date, little qualitative data exists to provide answers. And, as the recruitment of qualified students by college and university admissions and enrollment officers becomes increasingly competitive, understanding the answers to these questions will become imperative to effectively recruiting the next generation of students.

The following sections of this chapter will define several key admissions and marketing terms, and touch on the history and significance of marketing for colleges and universities. Specific emphasis will be given to the increasing utilization of digital marketing methods, specifically email. This historical overview, coupled with an analysis of current email marketing trends, will highlight the need for more data concerning how students experience and interact with digital marketing. The goal of this study is to better understand how potential students interact with digital marketing. The findings will also help to increase the knowledge and understanding of admissions and marketing professionals concerning how students receive information during the college search process.

Definition of Key Terms

In order to fully explain the nature of this study, several admissions and marketing “industry” terms must be defined. Many of these terms will deal with the ways in which admissions and marketing professionals classify students. Additional terminology, such as marketing practices, will also be defined. Definitions of these terms may vary from

institution to institution, and, as such, the definitions below are specific to the university at which this study took place.

First-time full-time (FTFT) – FTFT students are students who (a) have not taken credit-bearing classes at any post-secondary institutions after graduation from high school, and (b) are enrolled in at least 12 credit hours during the current semester of study. This definition comes from researchers at the Cooperative Institute Research Program at the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, who conduct an annual survey on FTFT freshman (Eagan et al., 2015).

In-State Domicile – The host of this study is a large public-research institution located in the Commonwealth of Virginia. As a public university, the host functions within the parameters set by the state in order to determine a student's domicile, whether in-state or out-of-state, for tuition and classification purposes. The Code of Virginia (§ 23-7.4) defines specific criteria for in-state domicile. The university's Office of Admissions makes most initial domicile decisions for student enrollment based on the completion of the Application for In-State Tuition document that accompanies each application.

Client/Customer Relationship Manager (CRM) – A powerful tool that functions as centralized database for student information, and assists staff in transmitting digital communications in a strategic and systematic way. Ziegenfus (2015) notes that many colleges and universities are now using digital Client/Customer Relationship Manager (CRM) tools in order to organize student inquiry pools and manage the flow of digital communications sent to students. The university at which this study took place is one of

the many institutions that utilize a CRM to manage its communications efforts with interested students.

Hucksterism – As defined by Wright (1995), a huckster “is a hawker or peddler who sells by showmanship,” or through misleading marketing tactics, such as unrealistic photos or overly composed narratives that are intended to misrepresent fact (p. 13-14). Hucksterism in college admissions marketing has ebbed and flowed over the past several decades, with many institutions striving for a balance between “serving their institutions and serving [their] students” (Wright, 1995, p. 15).

Marketization – Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown (2004) define marketization as the process by which institutions competing in the educational marketplace must continually increase marketing efforts as an institutional priority in order to stay competitive.

Historical Context of Higher Education Recruitment and Marketing

Wright (1995) recounts an anecdote ascribed to Ralph Waldo Emerson, who, in 1851, was astonished to find the newly established University of Rochester using “runners on the road to catch students” (p. 11). Such tactics were not commonplace during this period, as America’s academic institutions were in their infancy. As a result, colleges and universities used basic, if not haphazard, marketing techniques to attract students, making the University of Rochester’s more aggressive marketing and recruitment technique an outlier. Newman (2002) points to Henry Litten’s analysis of the progression of the practice when he stated that “marketing has long been a part of the true story of American colleges and universities—only the terminology has changed (and some of the techniques) to promote the experience” (p. 16). However, in the 1970s, as

competition for students and resources among higher education institutions intensified, admissions and enrollment management administrators began to adopt more strategic admissions marketing techniques as part of their recruitment and enrollment efforts (Newman, 2002; Wright, 1995). The College Board held a special conference on higher education marketing and communications in 1976, and effectively marked the start of an arms race between colleges and universities (Litten, 1980).

Marketing that is specifically geared to attracting potential students has become an integral institutional priority and is, at this point, an essential aspect of student recruitment and enrollment management. Many of the strategies and techniques used by secondary and postsecondary institutions were derived from non-education sector sources and adapted to education (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004). This fact was profoundly illustrated at the College Board's 1976 conference when college administrators and admission marketing specialists came to the realization that "colleges and universities [could] duplicate the marketing success of Johnson & Johnson's baby shampoo, Avis Rent-A-Car, Seven-Up, and Volkswagen" (Mackey, 1994, p. 51). The secret for higher education, according to the conference's findings, was similar to that of the consumer goods industry: position one's institution as a distinguishable product within the larger marketplace in order to establish a recognizable brand. Following the conference, multiple colleges and universities began to do this in earnest in order to carve out their own market share of the increasingly competitive prospective student supply. Schools produced glossy brochures with enticing photographs of campus life, academic opportunities, athletic events, and the overall student community. Other institutions

sought prospective students by telephone to arrange campus visits or prompt them to apply. In addition, schools started to engage their alumni community to participate in the recruitment and marketing process (1994).

Somoes and Soares (2010) explain how educational marketers sought to engage students in the “information search stage” of their decision-making process in order to gain an early influence (p. 385). To prospective students, institutions stressed the importance of making the “right” college choice (Canterbury, 2000), and began to break student data into segmented data sets, based on demographic information, in order to create more strategic marketing initiatives. As Mackey (1994) notes, “American higher education [had] entered the era of the hard sell,” with marketing efforts to match (p. 51).

Transition to Online Marketing Methods

Beginning in the late 1990s, the Internet replaced the sole reliance on mass mailings, glossy publications, and “shoebox[es] filled with inquiry cards” (Ziegenfus, 2015, p. 4). While more traditional marketing methods were not rendered completely obsolete, digital marketing, specifically email and web-based communication campaigns, became the foundation of admissions outreach strategies at many institutions. Regarding the use of digital means to communicate with prospective students, Simms (1994) notes that colleges needed to find ways to appeal to a larger array of potential students, using various materials to garner interest and persuade them to apply. Too, and as Clayton (2013) explores, challenges within the higher education marketplace, such as rising tuition costs and the need to demonstrate value, helped to push institutions toward more active and robust marketing techniques. Hanna (1998) supports the notion that

“advancing learning technologies, and growing competition among multiple providers, all seeking to gain competitive advantage,” (p. 93) accelerated the marketing race among institutions of higher education. To gain the competitive edge, these institutions sought to utilize the most advanced marketing techniques and tools to, as Mackey (1994) explains, differentiate themselves from their competition.

This competition for market share has not abated, as college and university admissions and marketing professionals have been increasingly challenged by the competitive admissions/recruitment marketplace to create and execute their marketing and advertising programs within the context of building an overall institutional brand (Newman, 2002). Creating similar and consistent messages across all marketing channels, including print and digital, has become increasingly important as marketing professionals sought to standardize messaging to prospective students. Additionally, the “management of web technology and use of database marketing to personalize marketing communications are viewed as increasingly common components of the marketing efforts in many admissions and enrollment management offices,” and permits for more strategic communication with potential students (Newman, 2002, p. 16). In order to effectively communicate with larger databases of students in a strategic way, institutions began the heavy utilization of CRMs (AACRAO, 2014). These powerful tools permitted institutions to further segment student populations, allowing for targeted digital marketing campaigns, including email marketing.

The increased utilization of digital marketing techniques, especially email marketing, is not without dangers. As colleges and universities have added a slew of

digital communication techniques to their marketing arsenals, the threat of over marketing to students has become a real problem within the field. Write (1995) notes that successful marketing is a balance between student priorities and institutional priorities and goals, such as piquing a student's interest and ultimately convincing that student to take a specific action, like registering for a tour of campus or submitting an application for admission. Unfortunately, intensification of competition for students may lead schools to more aggressive marketing and enrollment techniques, such as increasing the frequency with which they communicate with prospective students. These enhanced marketing techniques often introduce an aspect of hucksterism and potential misinterpretation into the marketplace.

Problem Statement

With an ever-increasing stream of applicants, and with those applicants applying to more schools than ever before (Holmes, 2015), enrollment management and admissions professionals look for emerging channels through which to communicate with prospective students in order to differentiate their institution from competitors (Ziegenfus, 2015). For many large public research institutions, glossy admissions view-books and printed advertisements are products of a bygone era. In the mid-1990s, the advent of the Internet and web-based tools, such as client/customer relationship management software for higher education, made large-scale electronic communication with students easier and more frequent (Wright, 1995). According to an American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers report, over 60% of colleges and universities in a diverse national sample utilized at least one CRM tool for

communication by 2014 (AACRAO, 2014). While increased marketing frequency, especially through electronic means, may increase the number of applicants to institutions, it may also lead to excessive communication, and failure to appeal to prospects as individuals within the higher education marketplace (Lewison & Hawes, 2007; Silber, 1980; Wright, 1995). As a result of these marketing pitfalls, students may feel overwhelmed or overlooked, especially if their peers are receiving communications and they are not, or if they are receiving marketing “garbage” (Jorgensen, 1994).

It is within this marketing landscape that this qualitative study sought to explore the following research questions:

1. During the first semester of classes, what, specifically, do students remember about the email marketing communications they received from the institution at which they are currently enrolled?
2. To what extent do first-time, full-time students think email marketing influenced their decision to apply to the specific institution that they are now attending?

Much of the current research on educational marketing has focused on school members’ and stakeholders’ attitudes toward the concept of marketing, institutional analysis of marketing efforts at competitor schools at both the secondary and postsecondary levels, the importance of marketing within the higher education landscape, and other choice factors (Canterbury, 2000; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004; Somoes & Soares, 2010). Answering these research questions provides evidence of the efficacy of digital marketing techniques for students enrolling at a large public-research institution,

with the goal of assisting enrollment management and marketing professionals in understanding the impact of their work.

In the subsequent chapter, I explore the current literature and previous research on the efficacy of admission marketing. The investigation into this body of research helps to frame my study on first-time, full-time freshmen at a large public-research university in the Commonwealth of Virginia, and explore individual student attitudes towards receiving digital admission marketing materials, as well as how, from a qualitative standpoint, students felt this marketing affected their decision to apply.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences that first-time full-time (FTFT) undergraduates had with email admissions marketing while they were prospective students by examining their attitudes towards receiving this type of communication, as well as how this type of communication affected their decision to apply. The majority of previous research into admissions marketing has focused primarily on how schools market themselves to students, as well as on the development of traditional print marketing strategies, and decision-making during the final college selection phase. And while higher education research, as well as psychological research, contains considerable data on the quantitative factors, such as digital campaign read and interaction rates, associated with digital marketing, few studies have sought to obtain students' perspectives on digitally-based email marketing prior to the submission of an application for admission. In the literature review, I explore the current research on digital marketing, as well as the connections across work done in the fields of higher education and psychology. Therefore, the following chapter on educational marketing begins with general theories on how students gather information about schools, with exploration into several theories on college choice.

Following the establishment of this theoretical framework, I investigate factors that contribute to school selection, and how schools market themselves to students. A

review of the literature and research on this topic provides a functional framework for this study, and helps to expose the gaps in research that exist on how students experience admissions marketing.

Chapman's Theory on Student College Choice

Chapman's 1981 model on student college choice is composed of two distinct, yet interrelated, postulates. First, Chapman (1981) found that a student's college choice "depends on student characteristics and external influences. The external influences, in turn, are composed of significant persons, characteristics of the college, and the institution's own efforts to communicate with prospective students" (p. 499). Chapman's findings suggest that students consider multiple sources of information to gain perspective on a specific institution, though not always in the way that an institution may intend. As such, Chapman (1981) continued that, "college information gained through high school experiences, the influence of significant other people, and the colleges' own efforts to communicate with prospective students appear to get filtered by these generalized, idealized expectations" (p. 499). Idealized expectations about the college search and application process may lead students to ignore or distort available information, and may lead students to make assumptions about institutions prior to conducting a full inquiry. It is important to note, as Chapman did, that his model does not, and cannot, account for all aspects of student college choice, but does provide a framework that highlights the major college choice and influence factors.

Chapman's theory of college choice is being used as the foundational theory for this thesis as the theory focuses in on the increased utilization of marketing techniques

during the college search and selection process. And while Chapman's work focused predominately on printed materials, the prominent medium of the era in which the theory developed, the same general principles can be applied to digital marketing techniques. His work highlighted the fact that "prospective students tend to read the printed materials they receive, though the impact of those materials comes rather late in the college selection process" (p. 502). Chapman, therefore, suggested that colleges and universities needed to target marketing efforts "within a strategy that recognizes and builds on the other influences also understood to impinge on students' decisions" (p. 502). Chapman showed that college admissions marketing materials influenced students' college decisions, but not to the extent or in the way college admissions officers or high school guidance counselors believed at the time (Chapman, 1981).

Chapman's research on college choice and institutional admissions marketing has remained relevant into the 21st century. When one considers that as the college population becomes more diverse and the higher education system continues to grow each year, the college choice process becomes even more complex, thus requiring closer attention to the specification of plausible choice sets (Chatfield, So June, & Chatfield, 2012). In other words, as students are presented with an increased number of college choices, the number of variables affecting those choices also increases, especially with regard to marketing materials.

Chapman - Expanded

While Chapman's theory on student college choice serves as the central framework upon which this study is based, it is important to note that a large amount of

additional research has been conducted into the topic of college search and choice, much of which is based upon Chapman's original findings. Some of this work includes Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model of college choice, which was further refined a decade later (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). At its core, this model "suggests students make decisions about college based upon available information and their goal is to maximize utility, effectively weighing whether the investment of time, energy, and resources into a college education will pay in the long run" (Daun-Barnett & Das, 2013, p. 117). Their college choice model postulates that students progress through three main phases of the college search process: predisposition, search, and ultimate choice. Daun-Barnett and Das (2013), in their analysis of how colleges and universities utilize other computer and internet-based tools, provide an excellent synopsis of Hossler and Gallagher's model, and explains the three distinct phases of college choice.

During the predisposition phase, which many researches have concluded occurs during the early part of a student's secondary educational experience, students are not actively gathering information about colleges and universities, but they are being influenced, to a degree, by external factors, such as family, relatives, peers, and school officials (Daun-Barnett & Das, 2013). Other factors, including proximity to certain schools, whether the student is from a rural, suburban, or urban background, and college or university name recognition also play a factor during this stage. According to Hossler and Gallagher (1987), this is also the period during which students, whether actively or passively, make the decision to pursue college education or not. A variety of other factors contribute to this decision. These students can be categorized into three groups: students

who never seriously considered not going to college, students who may apply to several schools and may or may not attend college, and students who never considered going to college (1987). Perna (2006) added while there is no standard timeline for students to move through the predisposition phase, it is generally thought to occur between seventh-grade and tenth-grade.

For students who make the decision to pursue post-secondary education, the next stage is the search phase. It is during this phase, which typically occurs between tenth and the early parts of twelfth grades (Perna, 2006) that students begin to interact with specific colleges and universities, and during which colleges and universities begin to actively reach out to students. Finally, during the choice phase, which typically occurs during eleventh and the latter part of twelfth grades (Perna, 2006), students compare financial aid options, consider the information that they have gathered, and make final selections concerning the institution they plan to attend (Daun-Barnett & Das, 2013). During this phase, students and other decision-makers are increasingly focused on finding the right “fit” with their selected institution, and less with what the university is actively trying to market to them.

When looking at these three phases independently, it is important to note that Hossler and Gallagher (1987) rank each phase in terms of how much influence institutions are able to exert to prompt potential students to take specific actions. In the predisposition phase, individual colleges and universities have minimal direct impact on student choice and attitudes. It is during the predisposition phase that institutions rely primarily on name recognition and institution visibility, such as hosting a sporting event

or concert, to reach potential students early in their college search process (Clayton, 2013). Similarly, Hossler and Gallagher note that during the choice phase, the third phase in the model, institutions have a minimal ability to influence selection, as most of the research and outreach has already been completed. As such, this leaves the search phase as the period of time during which institutions are able to directly influence the potential students (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Interestingly, Perna (2006) acknowledges that the search phase has, “traditionally been less frequently researched than the other two stages” (p. 102). However, as Hossler and Gallagher (1987) note, “at the same time students are searching for institutions, institutions are searching for students” (p. 217). Information concerning various aspects of the institution’s academic and student life, as well as additional differentiating factors specific to that institution, must be communicated during this period. On this point, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and Hossler et al. (1999) emphasize that to effectively increase the pool of potential applicants during this phase, institutions must work to enhance their communication efforts through a variety of channels. In order to understand how college admissions marketing materials can be enhanced, and, in turn, how they are perceived by student recipients, it is important to understand how students gather information about schools.

When and How Students Gather Information

Perna (2006) notes that less research has been conducted into the search phase of Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) student choice model. Similarly, research conducted by Chapman (1986) and Hoverstad, Lamb, and Miller (1989), analyzed the later stages of

the process through which students gather information about college. They identified five stages of the college search and selection process, with the first three of these stages of (1) pre-search behavior; (2) search behavior; and (3) application decision, the stage most relevant to this study (Hoverstad, Lamb & Miller, 1989, p. 332). Previous work has largely focused on the last two phases identified by Hoverstad et al., choice decision and matriculation decision, with minimal attention given to the search phases (Hoverstad et al., 1989; Huddleston, 2000; Somoos & Soares, 2010; Chatfield et al., 2012). Given that student recruitment is so important in today's competitive admissions environment, there is a need to better understand the factors during the first three stages of college choice that influence student decision-making (Moogan, 2011). Research shows that students moving through the initial stages are affected by a wide variety of choice factors. Somoos and Soares (2010), for example, note several choice factors that are central to a student's decision about a higher education institution. Their research shows that academic reputation, geographical location, guidance from vocational advisors/teachers, and personal influences affect student decisions more than all others during these initial stages.

Within the research that has been conducted on student search and information gathering activities, it has been found that student populations move through the search process at different rates for different reasons. Further, research shows that institutions must effectively manage students at each stage of the process, and market to students differently in order to attract the type of students they wish to enroll (Hoverstad et al., 1989). The search process can be described as elongated in nature (Moogan, 2011), with

different students participating in very personal ways. The factors that affect student decisions about schools, therefore, must be strategically selected and shared with institutional decision-makers (Keskinen, Tiuraniemi, & Liimola, 2008), as providing quality information is critical to advance students along the decision making pathway (Briggs & Wilson, 2007).

Current Trends in Marketing Techniques for Higher Education

As Clayton (2013) notes, very few studies had been conducted into the strategy and efficacy of higher education marketing prior to early 2000s, due, in part, to the fact that most schools relied on passive recruitment techniques at that time. Today, however, the higher education environment has become increasingly competitive and multifaceted. Institutions compete for students in the higher education marketplace due to the large number of choices students have (James, Baldwin, & McInnis, 1999), as well as the complex process of “developing relationships with multiple parties (e.g. students, parents, tutors, industry, professional bodies, government, alumni) over the relatively lengthy” college search and application period (Moogan, 2011, p. 574).

Newman’s (2002) longitudinal study of marketing practices in higher education indicates that there is not a consistent, coordinated effort among colleges to implement a comprehensive marketing plan. It is clear, though, that more targeted and strategic college student marketing concepts are needed to achieve institutional enrollment goals within the competitive higher education marketplace (Whiteside, 2004). A major aspect of these targeted marketing strategies is attempting to engage students through a medium with which they are familiar. For today’s students, that medium is digital and online

environments, which provide instant and timely access to on-demand information and tools.

Digital Marketing in Higher Education

According to Mentz and Whiteside (2003), today's schools "train children to use the Internet" from day one (p. 11). As a result, and as Moogan (2011) noted, "the traditional promotions element of the marketing mix is frequently standard mass media advertising and hard copy promotions like the prospectus and direct mail, but e-documents and the use of technology are becoming increasingly important sources" (p. 574). Moogan (2011) continued to note that with the majority of high school students reporting access to at least one electronic device, many reported the desire to receive more information via electronic means.

As previously noted, marketing practices, especially digital marketing, in higher education among institutions have proven to be inconsistent and largely uncoordinated (Newman, 2002). In order to become more strategic in terms of marketing efforts, institutions have turned to internet-based marketing and advertising techniques, such as website optimization (Mentz & Whiteside, 2003) and the heavy utilization of CRM tools for email and digital marketing campaigns (Ziegenfus, 2015). Further work with high school graduates, conducted by Mentz and Whiteside (2003), revealed that many students enjoyed the privacy of searching for college-related information from a personal computer or device because it required less interaction with people. Colleges and universities have capitalized on this fact. Moogan (2011) found that some institutions were able to easily segment the marketplace and craft tailor-made communication

strategies to suit specific needs of individual students. This allowed savvy colleges and universities to better “position themselves within the competitive environment” (Moogan, 2011, p. 583). All institutions have not enjoyed this competitive marketing edge though, largely due to uncoordinated digital marketing efforts at most colleges and universities (Newman, 2002).

Undoubtedly, the advent of the Internet as a primary source of information for students (Mentz & Whiteside, 2003) and the creation of the digital higher education marketing environment comes with a unique set of opportunities and challenges. A great deal of information is now constantly and continuously available to students, and colleges are in the process of further segmenting their communication strategies in order to best connect with their key recruitment markets (Mentz & Whiteside, 2003). Huddleston acknowledged that “new technology, on-line services, distance education learning programs, for-profit competitors, and student services must be considered” (p. 72) when crafting a marketing plan that can be successfully integrated into the overall enrollment management strategy of an institution. This adds to Schee’s (2009) analysis of the trend towards the “rapidly changing landscape in college student marketing” (p. 16). Given the rapid adoption of new technology, especially the increasing use of mobile devices, and heightened student expectations in terms of information availability and response time, the way in which colleges and universities market themselves has been altered quickly and dramatically to keep pace with technology. Work done by Ivy (2008) reinforces this position, and demonstrates the impact that digital marketing can have on a potential student’s impression of an institution.

Limitations of Current Research

Huddleston and Rumbough (1997) conducted work on perceived effectiveness and level of satisfaction with enrollment management and marketing utilization from the point of view of the institution. Much of the work surrounding institutional self-assessment of marketing strategies, though, remains un-synthesized, resulting in a gap in this aspect of higher education marketing (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2002). Schee's (2009) study on how college student marketing has changed since 1997 sought to fill the knowledge gap in this area, but focuses predominantly on small, highly-selective private institutions, and can be taken in supplement to work done by Watson (2000) on the utilization of strategic marketing at large public institutions. Clearly, colleges and universities have come to understand the need for strategic marketing initiatives (Huddleston, 2000; Newman, 2002; Schee, 2009; Ziegenfus, 2015), but, according to Moogan (2011), much of the "existing literature on the application of marketing tools within the student decision-making process is relatively dated" (p. 571) and focuses predominantly on the institution's experience with marketing techniques, rather than the student's unique experience. As Chatfield, So June, and Chatfield (2012) note, "further research should not ignore students' perspectives, but consider both institutional and students' perspectives to help us better understand college choice" through the lens of institutional marketing (p. 32).

To help address some of these limitations within existing literature, this study explored not only general student attitudes towards receiving digital admission marketing communication pieces, but also, more specifically, how study participants reacted to

specific marketing examples. These two data points, taken together, worked to demonstrate the relationship between digital marketing and a student's decision to apply to the institution.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

The following section outlines and details the qualitative methodological approach that I employed to examine student attitudes towards receiving digital admissions marketing materials, and the effect of such materials on these student's decision to apply to a large public-research institution. This section outlines the strengths and limitations of the study, as well as provides an overview of the study site, details the method of document collection, and describes my role as researcher.

Creswell (2014) notes that the goal of qualitative research is to understand the way groups and individuals assign meaning to their lived experiences. As this study focused on student attitudes towards receiving digital admissions marketing materials, and how these materials affected a student's decision to apply, a qualitative approach was most appropriate. The qualitative approach, through the use of individual interviews, allowed for a personalized look at how first-time, full-time freshmen domiciled in the Commonwealth of Virginia interacted with digital admissions media from a large public-research institution within the Commonwealth during their senior year of high school. Furthermore, as the receipt of digital admissions marketing materials is, for most students, a specific shared phenomenon, a phenomenological approach with a pragmatic paradigm was employed (Creswell, 2014). As the pragmatic paradigm places the research problem as central, and applies all approaches to understanding that specific problem,

data collection and analysis methods are chosen as those most likely to provide insights into the question (Creswell, 2014). These methods of data collection and analysis are described, in detail, in the following section.

Description of Study Site

This study took place at a large, four-year, public research institution located in the Commonwealth of Virginia, henceforth referenced as the host or the “Institution.” The study’s sample was drawn from FTFT freshman from the Institution’s undergraduate student population, which, at the time of the study, totaled more than 22,000 individuals. Over the past several years, this Institution’s incoming freshman class has totaled, on average, more than 3,200 first-time full-time students each fall intake. Furthermore, this study site was ideal because the undergraduate population at the university has consistently been ranked as one of the nation’s most diverse, with 46.2% of the undergraduate community from a group other than white U.S. citizens (Office of Institutional Research and Reporting, 2013, p. 35). This university was specifically chosen for this study due to its proximity to Washington, D.C., and its large and diverse student body. Beyond student population and demographics, this Institution was selected as the study site for its robust online presence and digital admissions communication plan. Prospective student communications, which are the focus of this study, generally originated from the university’s Office of Undergraduate Admissions, through the use of the Admissions CRM. At the time that this study was conducted, and the documents collected, this Institution used the Connect CRM, supported by Hobsons Enrollment Management Technology, in order to, as Bell (2009) notes, “manage all admissions

communications, track results and interact with prospective students” (para. 5). It is important to note that since this study took place, the university’s Office of Admissions has upgraded to a new CRM, though the functionality and content from the year this study took place has remained consistent.

Sampling Strategy

As previously noted, very little research has been conducted on student attitudes toward admissions marketing and its influence on a student’s decision to apply to a particular institution. In order to ensure a diverse sample, and attain sample saturation, a purposeful strategy was initially employed to create the sample for this study (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007).

A series of individual interviews was utilized to interact with students. The original intent of this study was to utilize a series of three targeted focus groups, composed of eight students who matched the specific eligibility criteria. These criteria included being FTFT freshmen, domiciled in Virginia, who attended and completed all four years of high school within the Commonwealth of Virginia, and who began at the university immediately following the completion of their high school coursework. Prior to the start of the study, the researcher chose to focus on individual experiences that would be more difficult to gather in a group setting. As such, the researcher conducted a series of individual student interviews. Creswell (2014) notes that while no standard minimum number of interviews exists, a phenomenological study such as this will generally have a range from three to 10 participants before saturation is reached. In this study, a total of seven participants resulted in adequate data.

The eligibility specifications proved important, as they ensured that the student participants had similar experiences with the type and frequency of the digital admissions marketing they received. The Institution targets students in the same geographic region with identical marketing materials, and the inclusion of non-Virginia students would have introduced additional and complex variables. In order to select students for these individual interviews, I employed a purposeful strategy to identify a sample of students who fit the study's participation parameters by soliciting students enrolled in a freshman-level UNIV 100 course at the host university. These one-credit, highly interactive courses are, as Keeling (2004) notes, specifically designed to promote a student's personal growth and transition to the university environment. The Institution coordinated more than 30 courses and 80 individual sections of this course during the Fall 2017 term, the period during which this study was conducted. While UNIV 100 courses are optional, the university reported that nearly one-third of new FTFT students enrolled in a section of UNIV 100 during the Fall 2016 semester, and a similar cohort size was seen during the Fall 2017 term (UNIV Courses and Programs, 2017).

Due to the nature of these courses, and the solid participation rate, UNIV 100 classes provided the ideal location to solicit participants from the specific population required for this study. In order to reach these students, I contacted UNIV 100 course instructors, via the university's office that coordinates UNIV courses, at the start of the Fall 2017 term, and requested that they send study-related recruitment email to students who had enrolled in their courses. I simultaneously posted recruitment flyers in the main student centers on campus in order to attract potential participants. This participant

recruitment strategy, however, did not return an adequate number of volunteer participants, and, as such, a chain strategy was employed in which previously identified sample participants were asked to help identify other potential participants from their social and/or professional networks. A number of study participants consequently stemmed from certain sections of UNIV 100 courses, specifically the honors sections. The participation sample accurately represented the general demographics of the host institution.

Students interested in becoming study participants received instructions to contact me via email, as noted in both the recruitment email and flyer. They then received an automated response with several questions used to gauge their eligibility, based on the criteria listed above. Selected participants were notified of their selection and a date was scheduled for their individual interview session. Students who were not selected for participation in this study received a notification that, based on the information that they had provided, they did not meet the study's participation requirements.

Document Collection

Fifteen months prior to the start of participant data collection, on June 1, 2016, I registered as a prospective student with the university under the pseudonym "Eric Banting," a fictional 18 year-old male student domiciled in the Commonwealth of Virginia with an "undecided" academic interest. By registering as an interested student, this test account received all digital admissions marketing material to an email account that was created specifically for this purpose. These email communications which were

saved, dated, and referenced during the individual interviews in order to allow student participants to more readily recall specific messaging.

Data Collection

Participant data for this study was collected through the use of targeted individual interviews, conducted with FTFT freshmen domiciled in the Commonwealth of Virginia. All individual interviews were conducted using the study protocol [Appendix A], while follow-up discussion and questions varied based on participant's responses. As this study utilized Chapman's model of student college choice (1981), each interview session focused on the efficacy of digital admissions marketing as a selection factor. As much information as possible was given to participants at all stages of this study, in accordance with the best practices described by Jacob and Furgerson (2012).

I employed the use of individual interviews to explore student attitudes toward digital admissions marketing. The individual interview protocol used in this study, including the specific guiding questions used in each interview, was piloted with current undergraduate students who work within the Office of Admissions at the host university in an informal setting to test the effectiveness of each question. As a result of this piloting, prior to actual data collection, several questions were added, removed, reworded, and reorganized.

Each interview was conducted over the course of 60 minutes, or less, in a reserved private study room in the Institution's main library building in order to ensure privacy and confidentiality, while simultaneously providing a centralized and convenient location. Light refreshments and beverages provided for all study participants at each

interview session. Interviews were recorded using an independent voice recorder. Specific instructions to speak clearly and slowly were provided to each participant prior to the start of each interview session. Transcription began at the conclusion of all of the interview sessions. Names and other personal and identifiable information were removed and replaced by pseudonyms to ensure participant privacy and anonymity. A total of seven individual interviews were conducted during the data collection period.

It is important to note that as emergent design (Creswell, 2007) is one of the hallmarks of qualitative research, following a strict protocol does not always allow for the design to emerge naturally as research is conducted. As such, while the general protocol and guiding questions for each individual interview remained consistent, branch conversations and tangential lines of questioning, based on interviewee responses and conversational direction, were followed and expanded upon. The majority of these additional questions occurred during the document review phase of each interview.

Data Analysis

At the conclusion of the series of individual interviews, transcripts from each session were loaded, chronologically, into the qualitative data analysis software program QSR NVivo, in order to assist with organization and analysis. A comprehensive coding schema was used to code specific terms, phrases, attitudes, and ideas within the transcripts of the interviews to identify common themes among participants, as well as isolate outliers. The data was organized by the student's general attitude towards receiving digital marketing, and whether they found it to be influential, moderately influential, or minimally influential on their decisions during the search phase of the

college selection process. Students who fell into each of these categories were reviewed as a group to further identify, expand upon, contextualize, and track trends among each response. This strategy is also consistent with those recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994) for observing social phenomena.

Trustworthiness

In order to demonstrate consistency and the overall quality of my methods in this proposed study, confirmability, dependability, credibility, and external validity (Miles & Huberman, 1994) must be shown. In order to establish this level of trustworthiness, a diverse sample of students, representative of the institution's demographics, was used. Additionally, study participants were given the opportunity to review the final findings of the study. All study related data will be retained for a period of no more than five years.

Researcher Positionality

It is important to disclose to the reader that I previously worked closely with the creation and implementation of digital marketing plans for prospective students within the Office of Undergraduate Admissions at the host institution. Therefore, this study qualified as “backyard” research (Creswell, 2014; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992), as it involved studying students who have received communications that may have been originally created, edited, or modified by me. It is important to note that while, at the time the data was collected, I no longer worked directly with admissions marketing and communications, I still had an intimate relationship with the marketing pieces being examined. This fact made me extremely conscious of my connection with the ideas, themes, and documents that each student interviewee discussed. As such, I took several

steps throughout all phases of my study to mitigate and minimize privilege and personal bias, as well as any perceived bias on behalf of the subjects. Chief among these steps is the fact that I did not fully disclose my role as the architect of the marketing plan being examined during the data collection phase. Additionally, when referencing specific marketing documents, I only made reference to admission marketing materials that the test user account, “Eric Banting,” received. These materials were the exact same materials that each study participant would have received. It is important to note that as participants were all already enrolled at the host institution at the time of data collection, no power-relationship existed between the researcher and the participants.

Researcher as Instrument

I have spent almost a decade working in higher education, specifically in freshman admissions and marketing. Through my work with students I have developed a strong interest in varied student experiences throughout the college application and admissions process, especially the factors that contribute to the selection of one institution over another. To that end, my research has centered on admissions pathways, experiences, and digital expression. In addition to my academic coursework, I have worked in a variety of capacities as a fulltime employee within the Office of Undergraduate Admissions at the host institution, including as an admissions counselor, the Senior Assistant Director of Admissions and Marketing, and now as the Director of Admissions Operations. While my current position has far less student contact, and, subsequently, less influence over marketing and communications decisions, I still have an interest in understanding what aspects of digital marketing plans students find most

useful, memorable, or engaging. Prior to starting professionally at my current institution, I earned my honors bachelor's degree from the a different large public-research university while working almost full-time within that institution's Office of Admissions as a Student Admissions Officer, the undergraduate opportunity that launched my career within higher education.

Limitations

Several limiting factors affected this study, including the fact that participants were asked to detail experiences that they had between eight and 12 months prior to the interview date. As such, there was no guarantee that subjects would be able to fully recall their experiences with enough detail to answer every questioned posed. When subjects were unable to remember specifically referenced documents, or fully recall their experiences, I asked them to state that directly. Additionally, and as with most qualitative work, a limitation of this study is that the findings, presented in later chapters, are non-generalizable, and the patterns that emerged concerning student attitudes toward digital admission marketing, and their perceived impact on a decision to apply, were specific to the group of students who participate in this study only, and not necessarily every student. The findings of this study, which occurred at a large public research institution, may not be applicable to small private or religiously affiliated schools, where different choice factors are present for potential students.

Summary

Within the competitive enrollment management and admissions landscape, research into reception of admissions marketing materials has, to this point, focused on

schools members' and stakeholders' attitudes toward the concept of marketing (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004). As roles within admissions and enrollment management become more dependent on effective marketing strategies, colleges and higher education professionals need to more fully understand the impact of their work from a student's perspective in order to more effectively communicate with prospective students.

My hope is that the findings of this study are able to contribute to the general body of knowledge concerning higher education marketing, as well as further inform higher education admissions and marketing practitioners on how to avoid admissions "hucksterism" by demonstrating how the digital admissions marketing message is being received by prospective students and how it affects a student's decision to apply to a specific institution.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The preceding chapters detailed the history of higher education marketing, with specific emphasis on the use of the Internet as the primary information gathering tool of prospective students (Mentz & Whiteside, 2003), as well as institutional use of CRM tools for highly segmented and targeted email and digital marketing campaigns (Moogan, 2011; Ziegenfus, 2015). This overview was framed by Chapman's theory of college choice (Chapman 1981), and the associated work of Hossler and Gallagher (1987), who expanded upon Chapman's framework, and provided the three-phase model of college choice: predisposition, search, and ultimate choice. It was also noted that colleges and universities are most able to directly influence the decisions of potential students during the search phase of the process. As such, the following chapter explores student interactions with digital admissions marketing during this crucial phase, and investigates common attitudes and sentiments, in accordance with assertions made by Chatfield, So June, and Chatfield (2012), who note that researchers, "should not ignore students' perspectives, but consider both institutional and students' perspectives to help us better understand college choice" through the lens of institutional marketing (p. 32). A sample of these perspectives was captured over the course of seven individual interviews with FTFT students at the host institution. The table, below, provides general information about the participants who have been addressed using their pseudonyms.

Table 1. Interviewed Students

Participant Number	Name	Declared Major at Point of Interview
1	Jennifer	Mathematics
2	Rachel	Psychology
3	Melissa	Computer Science
4	Michelle	Economics
5	Christina	Criminology
6	Selina	Neuroscience
7	Thomas	Bioengineering

Each subject provided their own individual experiences and perspective concerning their interactions with, and attitudes on, admissions marketing materials, with specific emphasis given to email marketing materials that they received from the host institution during the search phase of their college application processes. The first section, therefore, frames participant perspectives by providing a consolidated analysis of the general sentiments, expectations, and apprehensions those participants had about the college application process, and what factors contributed to the participants' experiences during the predisposition phase. Subsequent sections explore how institutions, both in a general sense as well as specific to the host, used various marketing techniques to engage

with participants. This is followed by a detailed examination of how the host used digital email marketing practices to communicate. Specific techniques were examined with each participant to discern what aspects of email marketing were most and least effective.

The final section explores participants' thoughts on the overall influence of digital admissions marketing, and how, specifically, this type of marketing affected their choice to apply to the host institution. While participants were generally unable to remember every email example with which they were presented, several key aspects of the host's email communication plan stood out as common denominators in terms of effective techniques. These common factors were explored and expanded upon.

Respondent Thoughts on Colleges and Predisposition

Daun-Barnett and Das (2013) note that during the predisposition phase, students are not actively gathering information about colleges and universities, but they are being influenced, to a degree, by external factors, such as family, relatives, peers, and school officials. Furthermore, other factors, including proximity to certain schools, whether the student is from a rural, suburban, or urban background, and college or university name recognition are also factors during this stage. These elements help to shape a prospective student's college search process, and have an influence on how receptive prospective students are to digital admissions marketing during the later search phase of the Hossler and Gallagher model.

When asked how they felt about the college search and application process, most interview participants cited several common areas of influence and concern, namely family interactions, distance from home, and perceived educational opportunities.

Melissa remarked that even though she “tried not to think about college that much because I was a little stressed about it,” and that during her “senior year of high school I was more focused on just finishing high school,” she was still “very much pushed to college” by her parents during this time. Jennifer’s experience was similar in that family members influenced her decision to begin researching potential college options and gathering information: “I never really thought about college until my sister got into college three years ago. That's when I started really thinking about it.” The same can be said for Selina, who took her college cues from a family member who had just gone through the college search and application process: “I have an older sibling. She kinda had a feel for the whole college life and everything. She was living at home too [...] she was kinda my way to transition towards college.”

Family members not only had a heavy influence on transitioning prospective students from the predisposition phase to the search phase, but also influenced the schools with which potential students would interact. A desire to stay close to family and friends was shared by all of the respondents. For many, schools close to their hometown or close to relatives drew immediate attention. Thomas is a prime example of this: “I was nervous about being away from home, not having anybody to help me if I needed anything. So I looked near family.” Similarly, Christina noted that she looked at schools close to home: “I was really nervous about college, because I was nervous about leaving my family.” These sentiments, which develop prior to the beginning of a prospective student’s college search, help to shape the nature of that search, and make potential

students either more or less inclined to be receptive to efforts taken by an institution to influence their decision to apply.

General Marketing Techniques

As previously described, colleges and universities are able to exert the most direct influence over potential students during the search phase of the process (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Concordantly, and as Somoes and Soares (2010) note, educational marketers seek to engage students in the information search stage of their decision making process in order to gain an early influence. Information concerning various aspects of the institution's academic and student life, as well as additional differentiating factors specific to that institution, must be communicated during this period. On this point, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and Hossler et al. (1999) emphasize that to effectively increase the pool of potential applicants during this phase, institutions must work to enhance their communication efforts through a variety of channels.

Non-digital marketing. While the focus of this study was to explore digital admission marketing, it is important to recognize that digital marketing is often consumed as a complement to non-digital admissions marketing, such as print media. All student interviewees made remarks about the receipt of non-digital marketing, and had varying perceptions. Selina remembered her experience and provided details about receiving physical mail from potential schools: "My entire senior year, I would say at least like four, five times a week I would be getting something in the mail from college. From all over the United States." She further elaborated on her experiences about receiving mail from schools with which she was unfamiliar:

For the schools that I haven't heard of, it was interesting. I [was] just kinda like, "Oh, I didn't even know this college existed." It gave me a feel for, maybe not now, but in the future, I wanna go move away from home and maybe I'll look into these other colleges. But, for the most part, they were pretty small schools. It wasn't anything that I was too ... I wouldn't move away from home and change all this stuff just to go to this one school that I haven't heard of in a different state.

Despite receiving items from multiple unfamiliar schools, she initially described the experience in positive terms: "It was nice. I was like, they picked me, they sent it to me." This initial excitement and interest, though, was short-lived, as the frequency with which she received these marketing pieces increased. Selina explained her evolving feelings on receiving print marketing pieces:

I [was] just getting stacks and stacks of mail from the same college, which I feel like ... For the first few weeks, [if] I didn't show any signs of interest, I feel like that should be a sign that I wasn't going to apply.

Selina's experience about being initially engaged and excited about receiving non-digital admissions marketing, followed by a transition to a state of apathy related to receiving these items, is not uncommon.

Christina, too, noted that during her senior year in high school, she received admissions marketing mail from colleges and universities, and was initially excited about it:

At first, when I first started getting them, it was definitely like, "Wow, I can't believe this time is coming around and people actually want me to go to their colleges." But as it kept going on, for however many months it went on, it kinda just went into a neutral kind of thing like, "Oh look at this. More mail about colleges."

Christina, similar to Selina, remarked that the constant contact with potential schools became too much, and she quickly evolved from initial excitement to annoyance at receiving admissions marketing materials in the mail during this period: "I would get like two letters a day. It was ridiculous." For Christina, it wasn't just about the frequency with which she received these printed marketing pieces, but also their content. Christina spoke about how she perceived some of the materials that she received to be impersonal and inauthentic:

I didn't like how generic it sounded most of the time. With most of the letters I'd gotten, it was like, "We're looking for you!" And it just didn't feel as genuine [...] It didn't really include facts about the school. Or it didn't really explain what the school's main topics or majors were. It was just kind of boring."

These opinions bring to light the importance of avoiding over-marketing, in terms of frequency, as well as over-inflation of information, two key aspects of hucksterism.

It is important to note that while the majority of interviewees indicate that they, like Selina, felt as if they were receiving "a little bit too much" in the mail, several subjects mentioned that they still, to a point, appreciated the physical act of receiving

something printed. For example, Michelle stated that she appreciated the tangible nature of a physical mailing, and that, “it actually felt like they [colleges] were trying a little bit more, 'cause it's more to send a piece of paper than send out a mass email in a way.”

Thomas echoed this sentiment, and elaborated further about the personal nature of getting a physical item: “I like print better when it's tailored to me. I guess it's more tangible and feels more important if it is printed.” Similarly, Rachel described her experience when she opened her mailbox and saw something with her name on it: “The fact that I was getting the stuff in the mail, I got really excited [...] because mail stood out to me a lot.”

These statements demonstrate that despite the evolving marketing environment, non-digital marketing still has a part to play. This finding is consistent with Moogan’s (2011) argument that current marketing strategies should include a mix of standard direct mail and mass media advertising, supplemented with the use of technology, which has become increasingly important.

Digital admissions email marketing. As previously noted, the advent of the Internet as a primary source of information for students completely changed the educational marketing landscape for colleges and universities (Mentz & Whiteside, 2003). The availability of these new marketing options, coupled with the fact that the majority of high school students report having access to at least one electronic device, and a desire to receive more information via electronic means, makes digital admissions marketing, specifically email marketing, increasingly important (Moogan, 2011). Student respondents report various reactions to digital admissions email marketing.

Thomas's experience offers a prime example of how subjects interacted with digital admissions email marketing in a general sense. When asked about when and how he believes that colleges and universities acquired student email addresses and contact information, he revealed how he thought the process worked: "Going through the application process and scholarships, they get your address and just send you everything." He followed up this statement by indicating that he was contacted by multiple schools, many of which he did not recognize. The experience of being contacted by seemingly random institutions was a trend among study respondents. Selina, too, indicated that she received email communication from schools about which she had never previously had a relationship. "I was getting quite a few emails," she said, "but some were irrelevant schools that I didn't really know of." As a general consensus, student respondents indicated that they had a negative reaction when they were contacted by unfamiliar schools. Even Jennifer, who indicated that she, as a high school student, checked her email frequently, said that she would "just delete it right away [...] if I didn't know where it was."

Digital Email Marketing from Host and Email Elements

A large portion of the time spent with each student interviewee involved an in-depth look at specific email marketing messages that they would have received directly from the host. These messages were sent between August and November of 2016, during the early part of each subject's senior year of high school, which coincides with the search phase of the college decision process. Individual email messages were examined and compared for various aspects. Respondents reported a large array of opinions on

different aspects of each message, including email layout and information content, the use of graphic elements, the sender of the message, and other stylistic elements. These characteristics, to a greater or lesser degree for each respondent, influenced the impact of the email message. The following section details specific sentiments concerning these characteristics.

Medium of consumption. A major aspect of the host's targeted marketing strategy is attempting to engage students through a medium with which they are familiar. For today's students, that medium is the digital environment, which provides instant and timely access to on-demand information and tools. Interviewees indicated that they generally preferred to receive digital messaging on their mobile devices. Selina explained in one of her first statements on this topic: "I just feel [I] like the digital mail. It's just easier [...] on my phone." The constant access to mobile phones and, for some subjects, laptop computers, made these two devices the most cited mode of consumption, as opposed to desktop computers or tablets. Rachel stated her preference, and remembered using her mobile phone for the majority of her email consumption: "I think it would depend on the person but mostly since we're like on our phones, on pictures all the time and looking at that, that's what we're used to." Several respondents noted constant attachment to their mobile device as a critical reason why it was the preferred medium of consumption. On this point, Thomas joined the other subjects when he stated: "Mostly on my phone, because it's just where I came across it. It was more convenient because they'd come across my phone."

In terms of medium, two of seven interviewees strongly indicated their preference for the use of a computer over a mobile device. Michelle asserted that her preference for reading email on a laptop stemmed from a readability standpoint: “Computer all the time. It’s just easier to read on the computer.” Melissa, who indicated that that she does have email set up on her mobile device, similarly stated her preference for reading emails on her laptop:

Probably more likely on my laptop because my school issued laptops, and when I wasn't paying attention in class, I was definitely emailing, online somewhere. [...] And so probably a lot on my laptop. I don't really remember reading any off my phone, or anything like that.

Regardless of whether the preference is for mobile phone or laptop consumption, all respondents consumed digital email marketing from the host.

Subject lines and sender. Regardless of the medium of consumption, two of the first characteristics of an email message that respondents see are the subject line and the email sender. Each interviewee had comments about these two aspects of email messages sent by the host, starting with the subject line. University marketing professionals invest considerable thought, preparation, and strategy into crafting visually appealing and interesting subject lines to attract attention and prompt action, as evidenced by the varied subject lines in the host’s email set examined by the subjects. Most often, this action is to open the message in order for the content to be displayed. Interviewees made several comments concerning their opinions of the subject lines that the host university uses in their email marketing campaigns, and to what degree these subject lines influenced

respondents' actions when interacting with the message, as well as their overall perceptions.

Several interviewees noted that the subject line of the host's emails often provided top-level information about what was contained therein. While looking at the subject line that listed a specific application due date on a message concerning deadlines, Rachel explained how she set up her email inbox to display email messages by subject line first, making them all the more important for her:

I think the subject line's really important especially since I have my inbox set up so it's just the subject line and not information, so you can get more on a page. One like this I would definitely look at because I like to plan things out.

For Rachel, the specific information contained in the subject line would have prompted her to take an action. Convenience also seems to be a motivating factor in how subjects interact with email marketing based on subject line. This sentiment was shared by Melissa, who noted: "I think they are important to a point [...] because you don't even have to read the email to know [what] it's about, honestly." Similarly, Selina remarked about the host's use of common language within the subject line text. The repeated use of similar phrases and keywords helped her recognize the email, even without reading it fully. While examining an email message that included one of the keywords that was used in multiple messages, Selina noted: "Even if I weren't looking at this email now, I'd be able to tell you, 'Yeah, that was a thing.'" This specific key word included the name of the host institution. Her experience indicates that the repeated use of specific keywords or

phrases helped her with recall, even if she didn't necessarily remember a specific message or text.

Next to an email's subject line, the second piece of information that respondents would have seen is the sender, or the name listed in the "from" line on an email message. The same set of emails that each subject examined included a mix of messages "sent" from either the Office of Admissions or by a specific person, such as the Director or Dean of Admissions. Here, all respondents were unanimous in their assertions that the sender listed on an email is far less important than the actual content of the message itself. Jennifer stated this directly, and noted that she cared more about what she read in the email message itself versus who the email was sent from: "I don't think it has that big of an impact, so I don't think I would have noticed." In a similar vein, as a high school senior, early in the school year, Thomas mentioned that he was focused on other things: "I wouldn't have noticed the difference that early in the stage."

Christina took these sentiments a step further, as her comments exposed her awareness that she was the subject of an automated email marketing campaign, instead of receiving correspondence directly from an individual person. When asked if she thought high level university officials wrote the emails that she had received, Christina stated bluntly:

Honestly, I don't really. I feel like someone else writes them, and then they may skim over them, or just sign it. But I didn't think that the people would actually write them. I don't know why. I can't explain really my reasoning.

Christina's feelings on this subject were correct, in that the vast majority of the emails sent by the host were not actually written by the person from which they were supposedly sent. This level of understanding demonstrates that some prospective students are aware that institutions use bulk email techniques to send digital admissions marketing messages, and make choices about which specific messages, and individual aspects of message, that they want to pay attention to or ignore based on that understanding. Rachel's comments made this point clear, as she explained her understanding of how mass marketing works:

Right, because back to thinking like everybody's getting this email, it still would not have felt as important to me. Kind of like if you write to the President, and they write you back, it's not actually them, because they don't actually care about what you're saying. They do on some level but it's not the actual head of the United States writing back to you and signing a paper.

This commentary further demonstrates that the name in the "from" line of an email marketing message generally plays less of a role in how recipients interact with the message itself. As Michelle noted: "most likely you're not going to read who it's from."

Hyperlinks. One of the digital marketing techniques that is evident in the email messages from the host is the practice of hyperlinking specific words, phrases, or entire sentences to related websites. These websites are designed to prompt a specific action, such as registering for a tour, joining a mailing list, or starting an application.

Furthermore, the use of hyperlinks allows the host to send additional information to the recipient by linking external websites into the body of the email message, which allow

recipients to obtain additional information beyond what is available in the text of the message itself. All of the respondents indicated that they noticed the host's use of hyperlinks, and the majority looked upon their use favorably. Of course, each student participant interacted with these hyperlinks in a different way, and had their own preferences about their overall use.

Many respondents indicated that these links were one of the first elements of the email messages that they noticed upon opening a message. As Jennifer noted: "I notice how there's more blue words in this one, so it directs your eye directly to those." Thomas also spoke about how he interacted with the hyperlinks in the email messages he received. Similar to Jennifer, his comments were general and mostly focused on how the links were something that were not only easily noticeable in the message, but also identifiable as a link to more information. He explained his feelings about hyperlinks: "[They] just catch my attention, first of all, it's just all of the links in here to take you to that information more."

Several recipients indicated that the placement of hyperlinks, not just their presence, had an impact on how they interacted with the email, and whether or not they clicked on the linked material. A common sentiment was that hyperlinks toward the end of a message had a higher chance of recipient interaction than links closer to the beginning. Melissa justified her reasoning for this behavior: "it's further down in the message because I knew if I click this it's going take me to another window immediately, before I'm finished reading it." Similarly, Christina described a similar behavior when

she read the host's emails: "I usually scroll to the bottom of an email, because sometimes links are repeated again. So I would probably do the bottom."

More than just their location, the importance of the use of hyperlinks is not lost on the recipients, who have an understanding as to why the host decided to place them within the email messages. Of the respondents, Rachel had the strongest feelings concerning hyperlinks and their use within email. She began by describing her general sentiments about these elements: "For me, hyperlinks within emails are really helpful because that way you know exactly where you're going, and they're saying this is where you need to go. I will take you there." Later, while examining an email message with a large proportion of hyperlinked material, Rachel provided her advice on how the host should continue to use hyperlinks to direct recipients to additional information in a judicious way:

I would definitely say to continue to use the hyperlinks to bring people to the information that they want instead of putting mass amounts in the emails. Because it's just too much, especially if you haven't decided on that school. This is too much information, I'm not even going to look at it at that point. Then you've lost an opportunity to teach that person what you have.

These statements indicate that the strategic use of hyperlinks to shorten what would otherwise be a long message can be important. The use of hyperlinked words and phrases, though, can be overdone. For example, Michelle indicated that she felt overwhelmed by the number of blue hyperlinks in several of the messages that were

reviewed, and even remarked that there certainly “was a lot of blue stuff to click on.” For Michelle, an overabundance of hyperlinked words and phrases created an undue sense of urgency, and left her feeling confused about what action she should take, and in what order she should click on the links. She detailed her feelings on this subject and noted how she felt when she received a message full of linked material: “Because if you see everything in blue it feels like you have to click on all of them in order to get the proper information instead of just clicking on one main one.” As such, it is clear that while hyperlinks provide additional opportunities to connect with recipients and provide additional information, a sensible and judicious use of this element is required to ensure a more easily digestible and retainable marketing piece.

Pictures, graphic elements, and layout. The creation of easily digestible and visually appealing messages is important to ensure that the recipient consumes the information contained within each message. To accomplish this task, the host institution took advantage of a variety of different formatting options to appeal to recipients, including the use of various email layout options, as well as the incorporation of photography and other graphics into email messages. By examining a sample set of selected email messages, the study subjects were asked about these various strategies to determine if, and to what extent, formatting options influenced their perception of specific messages.

One strategy that was used to increase the impact and influence of email messages was the use of deliberately placed photography within the body of the email itself. Here, the study subjects were unanimous in their affinity for messages that included some

visual aid, rather than messages that were solely comprised of text. The addition of visual elements, according to the study subjects, made email messages more engaging and helped to clarify the purpose of the email. According to Melissa, using photos also allowed her to more easily relate to the institution. She clarified her opinion:

The one with the pictures seems a little more engaging; just with the pictures and everything. It also is, like, the way it shows the students and everything [...] this is like a real place. People actually go here.

This is something that is not just a name on a piece of paper.

Crafting visually appealing email messages doesn't just have an effect on potential recipient engagement with the message, but also helps the reader better understand the content contained therein. This is further indicated by Selina's experience when she expressed her preference of having pictures included in the body email messages and said:

I just like visuals. It intrigues me. If it's just a bunch of text, I'd probably just skim through it, read only the first few lines. [With pictures] it kind of breaks up the text, so its not as concentrated and you can just go through the list really quickly and get a sense for what the email is talking about.

In her comments, Selina exposed another stylistic preference. She noted that, in addition to the inclusion of visual elements, she preferred emails in which large blocks of text were avoided. In lieu of these text blocks, these messages that she found effective included visual elements and quick facts, making the message easier to quickly read. This

desire to easily access information contained within the email message without having to sift through paragraphs of text was shared by most of the interview subjects who, as previously noted, did the majority of their consumption from cellular phones or similar portable electronic devices. This is illustrated by the reaction that Christina had while examining a set of emails that used picture elements and minimized the amount of text within each message. When asked about the elements that made her prefer this set of emails over others, she indicated:

The pictures, and how it's not a lot of words, and it's very simple statistics, and it just tells you about the school. I would read every single one of these. And then the text at the top, it's not too long, so it's just easy to skim through and then see the picture and all that.

Christina's summary of why she preferred emails that included visual elements and easy-to-read text indicates that this style has the potential to be most influential or engaging. As such, it is unsurprising that among the interview subjects, messages that included minimal text and heavy use of simple statistics and photo elements elicited the most positive reaction. Thomas's comments reflect the general attitude of the subjects when presented with this style of message. He simply stated that the use of these elements, "make it easier to get the information you're looking for."

Frequency. Interviewee responses indicated that the content of emails, hyperlinks, visual elements, and even the general text layout of the email messages have the potential to be important factors in how recipients engage with email messages. However, it was the frequency with which the host sent messages that had the greatest

impact on student perceptions, and elicited the strongest response during the interview sessions. When asked about email frequency, respondents offered varied feedback, and noted that different schools were observed to send emails at different frequencies. Thomas, for example, indicated that: “Some schools definitely sent a lot more than others. I think there may be a little too much, just from all of the schools together. I would unsubscribe from them.” As a general consensus, the majority of subjects reported that schools, including the host, sent too many emails, too frequently. They each, however, had varying experiences and reactions to this barrage of email communications.

During our conversations, student respondents noted that they fully understood that email marketing has become a norm with which they must live. Several respondents, however, suggested that they were surprised with the volume of emails they received from prospective post-secondary institutions, including the host. When asked about her experience in terms of the frequency with which she received email messages from schools, Christina indicated that she received too many emails, but understood the reason why she received more emails than physical letters: “Way too much. More so than the letters, because email is much easier to broadcast to a bunch of people than letters are.” On this point, Christina is correct in the fact that email broadcasts are much easier and less expensive to send. This ease of use, however, can lend itself to abuse on the part of the institution, and discourage recipients.

Michelle indicated that she had concerns about not only the volume of emails that she received, but also about their redundant nature. For her, receiving multiple emails on the same topic led her to partially disengage from email communication with schools,

causing her to potentially miss important information. When asked about email frequency, Michelle has this to say about her experience opening her email inbox to multiple school emails: “Way too much [...] There was a lot of them, some of them I didn't even really open because I would just get so many from the same colleges.” She went on to detail her rationale for this sentiment and her actions: “When you open your mailbox and there's seven emails from the same school and three of them are about the same thing, sometimes it's just like, why?”

While all subjects indicated that they received many email messages, several respondents made special note that they received a considerably larger volume of messages during their college search period than they would have expected. Such was the case with Selina, who indicate that she was, at times, overwhelmed by email messages from various schools. When asked about how many messages she received while looking for schools, she detailed her experience and remarked about how she managed the volume:

I'd be getting anywhere from 10 to 15 emails a day. Every time I'd open my email, I'd have to go in and delete random emails from a bunch of random schools. I would say it's a little much [...] I got a bunch of emails about just admissions. Apply here, apply here, apply here. Those were a bit much. At some point, I was like, "Okay, enough. I've already chosen my schools."

Melissa noted that she received a large volume of emails each day as well. For her, this massive volume led her to stop reading the content of the messages, and move to a

system whereby she would delete messages before interacting with them. She detailed her experience and mindset by saying:

I think I probably put tags on a lot of them to go straight to my trashcan in my inbox because I would open my email and have like 60 emails and it's a little overwhelming to look at. I was opening my inbox to 30 emails at a minimum every day.

Clearly, for these subjects, the volume of email messages received had a major effect on how they interacted with the messages and, ultimately, whether they consumed any of the information contained therein.

Of the student respondents, only Jennifer noted that the frequency with which she received email marketing was appropriate. When asked to describe her experience receiving multiple emails from the same institution, she noted that: "I think it's a perfect amount. I think I wasn't really that annoyed if I got too many emails, so yeah, I think it was okay." Jennifer's response demonstrates that while many in this sample indicated that they thought that institutions sent email messages too frequently, this opinion is not universal. It is interesting to note that while the majority of the study subjects indicated that they believed that they received too many email messages, none of the subjects unsubscribed from the messages, even though this option was presented in each message from the host.

Student Thoughts on Influence of Digital Email Marketing

Through a general discussion on admissions email marketing, as well as detailed examination into the various components of the host's digital marketing plan, each

student interviewee had the opportunity to share their experiences about how, and based on which email characteristics, this type of marketing influenced them during their college search process. As part of each interview, I asked the subjects whether they thought digital admissions marketing, sent by the host, directly influenced their decision to apply to the host, and to what degree. Taken with the information each respondent previously provided during our examination of specific emails and their various characteristics, the subjects can be grouped into three degrees of influence: those that found admissions email marketing to be influential, moderately influential, or minimally influential. Of the seven interviewees, all subjects indicated that digital admissions email marketing had some degree of influence on their decision to apply to the host institution. Results of this classification can be found in the table, below, and are further detailed in the following section.

Table 2. General Student Attitudes Toward Email Marketing

Name	Degree of Influence
Jennifer	Influential
Melissa	Influential
Christina	Influential
Selina	Influential
Thomas	Moderately Influential
Michelle	Minimally Influential
Rachel	Minimally Influential

Influential. Four of the seven subjects interviewed indicated that they found digital admissions marketing to be generally *influential* when they were deciding to which schools they would apply. Among these four, their reasons for holding this belief varied. For example, Selina noted that her experience receiving digital admissions email marketing was positive. She found the emails useful because they were able to provide new information that allowed her to make decisions more efficiently and effectively. She elaborated on her experience and commented on the degree to which she thought email marketing influenced her decision to apply:

I think the email is a big part of it. A lot of the other schools I was interested in, I would get really minimal emails. I didn't really know much about [the host institution] before. I feel like they were really helpful. The emails just made me more interested in the school in general. Just getting all this information that maybe I didn't know before it helped me make my decision a little faster.

Selina's comment about email marketing as a vehicle that recipients could use to obtain additional information was commonly shared, and expanded upon, by other subjects who indicated that they believed emails were influential to their college search and application decision process. While this sentiment was shared, the degree to which subjects believed information was fully consumed by their peers varied. For example, Jennifer, who noted that she believed email marketing had a high degree of influence on her college choice, asserted that she thought that this influence was due, in part, to her personal email habits.

She expressed doubt that other students her age might have the same experience because they might not check their email account as often as she did. She detailed her response when she stated that:

I think that it would have an influence [...] I don't know about other students, but for me, I think since I check my email a lot. I think that other students wouldn't really do it as much, so they wouldn't really, I guess, read through the whole email. I think they would just get the gist of it and not think about it at all.

Here, Jennifer makes an interesting point about email habits among high school seniors. Her assumption that other students may not check email as often as she did was supported by Christina's experience.

Christina, who also indicated a generally positive position on the influence of digital admissions marketing, indicated that she found the messages effective, and noted that she started checking her messages more often as a result of receiving this type of communication. She expanded upon her experience and her interactions with email marketing when she said:

I think it had a rather big effect on it, because I do read emails ... Because of all the college applications, I did start reading my emails a lot more. I didn't necessarily get the mail every day, so email was kind of my way to look into a school. And usually in emails they would have "apply" links so you could go to the school's website, and find out even more. So personally, that's how emails were pretty big for me.

In her comments about her experience, Christina exposed an additional important detail about the usefulness of digital email marketing, in that these messages provide easy access to important information and a pathway to obtain additional information based on the recipient's needs. Melissa observed this benefit of digital marketing over traditional print media. When asked whether she preferred digital marketing over print marketing, she responded in the affirmative, and noted:

I do because it's when you have so many emails, it's really fast and then it's really to the point as well. So it's easy to read, it's easy to digest. You know all that information is right there. And that's the most important ...

What was deemed the most important information as well.

Pointedly, Melissa made a final note when she stated that: "I'm thinking that if I didn't have the emails, I don't know if I would have known much about [the host], or if I would've taken on that initiative to figure it out." This is a powerful statement in favor of the positive effects that digital admissions marketing can have on high school students.

Moderately influential. Based on statements made during the interview sessions, one subject indicated that digital admissions email marketing was *moderately influential*, but did not play a major role in his decision to apply to the host institution. Thomas was clear throughout his interview that while he was able to see the role and importance of email marketing, and while email messages may have prompted him to take other actions, such as coming for a tour, other factors had a stronger influence over his decision to apply to the host institution. Concerning the degree of influence of email messages to prompt him to apply the host, he noted that:

I don't think it was so much for me [...] for me it was the visit to campus. The gut feeling, this is where I want to go. [The emails] definitely made me come to campus, because I had the feeling from the emails and my looking around online, but they definitely pushed me towards that, to make sure I set up the tour to come see the campus.

For Thomas, emails were effective in influencing him to take an action that resulted in him applying to the host, though he did not interpret the email messages themselves as the direct reason for his decision to apply. Taken within the overall context of his interview session and based on his interactions with the messages, Thomas's general experience with digital admission marketing can be classified as *moderately influential* concerning the degree to which these messages affected him.

Minimally influential. Two subjects, Rachel and Michelle, both indicated that while they could understand the importance and usefulness of digital admissions marketing, and that these messages did have some degree of influence on them, they didn't feel as though receiving these messages was a major factor influencing their decision to apply to the host institution. As such, these subjects can be classified as having found digital admissions email marketing to be *minimally influential* on their college search processes.

It is interesting to explore why Rachel and Michelle thought that digital admissions email marketing efforts were minimally influential to their college search process. Michelle, for example, shared that she generally believed that email marketing played a minimal role in her decision to apply, but that she understood that receiving

these messages meant that a school was potentially interested. She expanded on this sentiment and stated:

I'd say they played a minimal part, but they did somewhat affect it because if you continuously see a school going after you, you're going to know that obviously they're going to respect you a little bit more I guess is the word. But they obviously want you a little bit more than some of the other colleges who don't give you anything, who aren't pursuing you.

Here, it is important to note that Michelle didn't dismiss the impact of digital admissions email marketing outright, but, instead, qualified its minimal impact on her by stating that while she was not greatly influenced by the emails, she understood that receiving these communications meant the host institution was potentially interested in her. Rachel, too, did not outright dismiss the usefulness of digital admissions marketing, but, again, qualified those statements by noting that the messages, themselves, did not have a major impact on her decision. She elaborated and explained: "I don't think what I got from [the host] influenced my decision, except that I would use it as reinforcement to show my parents what I liked about the school." For Rachel, digital admission marketing was used to supplement information that she had been presented through a different medium, and was not the primary or motivating source of that information.

Effective digital marketing techniques. Regardless of their overall perceptions about the degree of influence of digital email marketing techniques, this study's subjects all provided insights into their preferences concerning the individual marketing strategies that the host employed. One of these specific strategies was the use of embedded

hyperlinks within the body of the email. Based on interview responses, the host's use of hyperlinks was not only one of the most easily identifiable techniques, but also one of the most effective for this study's participants. Every subject in this study indicated that they noticed the hyperlinked material, and many subjects stated it was one of the first things that they noticed. The host's use of hyperlinks not only permitted the recipients to access additional information beyond what was available in the email itself, but also affected how recipients interacted with the email. Several subjects noted that they were directly drawn to the hyperlinked material because they recognized what it was, though some indicated that they did not want to immediately interact with linked material too early within a message. The use of strategically crafted, concise, email subject lines also were shown to resonate positively with the sample group. The use of repeated words or easily identifiable phrases within email subject lines across multiple messages allowed some study subjects more readily associate the messages, and their content, with the host institution.. In addition to hyperlinks and subject lines, the strategic use of visual elements within the body of email messages was also found to be effective. When evaluated, most of the study subjects indicated that they favored messages that included visual elements with minimal text, as these emails were found to be generally more memorable, or elicited a greater positive response.

The study's subjects indicated that, of all of the techniques explored, the frequency with which subjects received email messages had the potential to have the greatest effect on perceptions of email marketing, as this element elicited some of the strongest responses. Respondents indicated that the volume of email messages that they

received from potential schools, including from the host, surprised them. This barrage of email communication was not well received by most of the subjects in this study. Each of the subjects who indicated that they believed that they received too many messages noted that the numerous messages prompted them to open and read fewer of the emails, especially if there were receiving messages from multiple institutions.

Summary

This study indicated that the student experience with digital admissions marketing, and the degree to which that marketing influenced student decisions to apply to a school, is varied. This experience depends on a variety of factors, and differed among the participants. Commonalities with this experience, however, do exist, and were identified as a result of comments made by each subject concerning their general thoughts on digital admissions marketing. These comments reveal that more than half of the sample agreed that digital admissions email marketing played an effective and or impactful role in their decision to apply to the host institution. Through the examination of specific elements of the host's digital marketing plan, and an overview of each subject's thoughts on various example emails, several commonalities were identified as they related to effective digital marketing techniques. In the next section I will discuss possible implications for students and practitioners, and recommend areas of future research through an expansion of this study and related studies.

CHAPTER FIVE:DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The purpose of this research was to explore student attitudes pertaining to digital admissions email marketing, including the extent to which these messages influenced a student's decision to apply to college during the search phase of Hossler and Gallagher's three-phase model of student college choice. This phase of the college choice process has, as Perna (2006) noted, been less studied than the other two phases. Using a phenomenological approach with a pragmatic paradigm, I collected and analyzed student interview data to capture each participant's unique experiences and preferences. The research questions that informed this study were:

1. During the first semester of classes, what, specifically, do first-time, full-time students remember about the email marketing communications they received from the institution at which they are currently enrolled?
2. To what extent do first-time, full-time students think email marketing influenced their decision to apply to the specific institution they are now attending?

This research was informed by Chapman's (1981) theory on student college choice with respect to student's unique and individual experiences with digital admissions marketing, as well as Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model of student college choice. It sought to consider both institutional and student perspectives to help better understand

college choice through the lens of institutional marketing (Chatfield et al., 2012; Moogan, 2011).

This chapter includes a discussion of the findings as they relate to Chapman's theory of student college choice (1981), under which digital admissions marketing is classified as a part of an institution's efforts to influence potential students. This discussion connects my research to that previously conducted by others on the influence of digital marketing practices on student college-choice and how those students experienced and reacted to those efforts. Specific examples of both effective and ineffective marketing practices are provided, based on subject feedback and discussion. I conclude with implications and recommendations for practitioners and suggestions for future research on this subject.

Discussion

My findings indicate that students have the potential to be influenced by digital admissions email marketing during the search phase of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model of college choice. This phase of the college choice process has traditionally not been a primary focus of research on how institutions influence potential students (Chatfield et al., 2012; Hoverstad et al., 1989; Huddleston, 2000; Perna, 2006; Somoos & Soares, 2010). The degree of this influence depends on individual student characteristics, but also on specific actions and techniques that the institution can use within email messages to increase the possibility for engagement. This finding is in line with work done by Ivy (2008), which demonstrated the impact that digital marketing campaigns can have on a potential student's impression and opinion about an institution

during the search phase. Further, this study's findings help admissions marketing practitioners frame their communication strategies by exploring student perspectives on digital marketing. These perspectives have not been fully explored by the current body of research (Chatfield et al., 2012).

The experiences and preferences of the study participants revealed through interview sessions indicate that students have the potential to be influenced by digital admissions email marketing, and that the degree of that influence is dependent on a variety of factors. These factors include individual preferences and behaviors, such as Jennifer's tendency to check her email often or Melissa's preference to read email messages on her laptop versus her mobile device, which are out of the institution's control. Conversely, colleges and universities can control certain aspects of digital admissions email marketing that were shown to potentially have an influence over recipient engagement. These techniques included ensuring that messages were sent with an appropriate level of frequency, incorporated visual elements into messages, and strategically included hyperlinked material. The findings of this study also give practitioners an indication about email marketing techniques that recipients found less influential, such as the use of large blocks of text within messages or the overuse of hyperlinks.

Implications for Practitioners

This study captured student perceptions and attitudes towards receiving digital admission email marketing during the search phase of the college choice process, illustrating how the students in this study interacted with the messages and to what extent

they believed this type of marketing affected them. Further, this study revealed several commonalities among its subjects that point toward possible actionable items to allow practitioners to refine their marketing efforts in order to be more effective.

Based on the information shared by this study's participants, one first step that practitioners could take in order to be more effective with their digital admissions email marketing campaigns is conduct a full communications audit on all digital messages being sent to potential students. By conducting such an exercise, which should include a inventory and examination of all of their digital messages, practitioners would be able to establish a baseline understanding of their digital marketing campaigns. Following the establishment of this baseline inventory, and in accordance with subject recommendations, practitioners could then evaluate individual messages to confirm that they included aspects that the study respondents indicated were influential.

This study showed that several aspects of the host's digital admissions email marketing plan were influential, such as ensuring optimization for mobile consumption, clear and concise subject lines, and strategically using photography and hyperlinks. As such, practitioners should attempt to incorporate these types of strategies into their own marketing and communication plans. Once a communications audit is completed, practitioners could identify specific emails where the addition of visual elements would make the most sense. Additionally, the length of many emails could be reduced by the strategic utilization of hyperlinks to incorporate access to information without increasing the length of the message itself. These hyperlinks should provide recipients with access

to relevant information, related to the email message, and be located closer to the end of a message, in accordance with the preferences illustrated in this study.

Further, practitioners could use the results of a full communications audit to refine their communication plans in term of addressing concerns about email frequency. Most subjects included in this study indicated that they believed that they received too many email messages, or messages with too high of a frequency. Some subjects indicated that during their senior year of high school they would receive more than 10 messages per day from various institutions, and would, in some cases, receive multiple emails from the same institution in the same day. Practitioners should critically examine the frequency with which they send emails, and ensure that messages are sent with an appropriate amount of time between them. Additionally, the messages should be reviewed for content to ensure that the message's text makes sense for the recipient. As indicated by several subjects, it is important for the host to be cognizant of timing when releasing important information, such as application deadline announcements or prompts to attend a campus tour.

This study revealed not only which email marketing techniques were effective at influencing recipients, but also which techniques the study's subjects found less effective in terms of a message's degree of influence. One of these specific techniques included the name of the sender associated with individual email messages. Respondents indicated that the sender of a given email message was less important than what substantive information that message contained, or how that information was presented. As such, practitioners may find it useful to remove references to specific people in their email

“from” lines, and opt to have messages indicate that they are from the Office of Admissions only. Additionally, and of specific importance, many subjects indicated that the amount of text contained in a message was significant in determining whether that message was effective or ineffective, and its associated degree of influence. The general consensus among study subjects showed that email messages that exclusively contained large blocks of text, or had large paragraphs, were less effective in engaging the recipients. When presented with emails with large amount of text, study subjects were less frequently able to recall receiving those specific messages versus similar messages that included visual elements or minimal text. In order to improve engagement, practitioners should avoid overly verbose emails and favor short and succinct messages.

These implications and suggestions for practitioners include recommendations directly from a sample group of digital admissions email marketing recipients. The suggestions were based on similar sentiments shared by multiple study participants. By incorporating the digital marketing techniques that resonated with the study group, and being mindful of the risks and consequences of techniques that were less influential, institutions may be able to more accurately and individually target potential students in their digital admissions email marketing campaigns. The following recommendations for further research provide opportunities for future studies to more deeply examine the efficacy of digital admissions email marketing.

Recommendations for Future Research

In this study, I examined student attitudes concerning receipt of digital admissions email marketing, and the extent to which those messages influenced their decision to

apply to a specific institution. Further, I explored specific elements of these marketing messages to gauge the degree to which they were, or were not, effective in influencing this choice. Based on the results and findings of this study, recommendations for future research include: a refinement of the current study and an expansion of the study to include additional student populations.

Refinement of the current study. This study increased knowledge about student college choice during the search phase of Chapman's (1981) model, and explored specific details concerning the experiences of the student subjects involved. Future studies on digital admissions marketing should include a larger number of participants in order to obtain a wider array of experiences and opinions. A potential quantitative survey of an entire entering freshman class could help determine the overall perception of digital admissions marketing, and an expanded number of qualitative interview participants could provide greater depth into those sentiments. Further refinement opportunities for this study include accelerating the timeline of the study in order to engage student subjects earlier in their first semester. By engaging subjects as early as possible during their first semester of college, or perhaps during summer orientation prior to the start of the academic term, there may be a greater possibility of the subjects remembering specifics about their college search and decision process. Additionally, greater detail and information could also be achieved by further refining the interview questions to directly ask subjects about which marketing techniques, or email attributes, were or were not effective.

Expansion to additional student populations, schools, and non-responders.

This study focused exclusively on first-time, full-time (FTFT) freshmen at a single institution. An expansion of the sampling parameters, to include both non-resident first-time freshmen, as well as transfer students, could provide additional depth and breadth to the study. A study with these expanded parameters could provide greater insights into the nuances of digital admissions email marketing and how it affects different student populations. Future researchers could also perform this study at multiple institutions in order to gain insights into how students at various institutions perceive and experience digital admissions email marketing. Researchers should consider expanding this study beyond large, public-research institutions, and include private, for-profit, and vocational institutions as well. Experiential commonalities among the student populations at these various institutions could then be explored and expanded upon, contributing to the body of current research in a more comprehensive manner (Hoverstad et al., 1989; Huddleston, 2000; Somoes & Soares, 2010; Moogan, 2011; Chatfield et al., 2012).

A further opportunity to expand this study to additional student populations is to engage students who received the institution's digital admissions email marketing messages, but who decided to not apply to that institution. While this student population would be more difficult to identify, their experiences with email marketing should be included in a comprehensive assessment of the institution's digital email marketing campaign.

Conclusion

The results of this study show that, in relation to Chapman's (1981) model, prospective students are generally positively influenced by an institution's digital marketing efforts, though the extent of that influence depends greatly on individual characteristics and preferences of the recipients. Findings indicate that the majority of subjects categorized the influence of receiving digital admissions email marketing as either influential or moderately influential, with the minority of subjects indicating the experience was minimally influential as it related to influencing their college selections.

Further, this study exposed several aspects of digital admissions marketing techniques that have the potential to have an impact on how and to what extent recipients interact with this type of marketing. In particular, the frequency with which institutions send messages was shown to have an effect on how, and if, recipients interacted with email messages. Several interviewees indicated that they reduced or completely stopped interacting with messages sent by institutions, including the host, if those messages were sent with too high of a frequency. Comments made by the interviewees also showed that the use of hyperlinks to provide additional information that expanded upon the text content of the message was an impactful technique. Interviewee responses indicated that these links, while helpful, should be kept to a minimum to increase the probability that the recipients, who were consuming the majority of these messages on a mobile device, would read the message. Consumption of email messages on a mobile device also revealed the importance of email layout and formatting. Respondents, for example, noted that they were less likely to interact with messages containing long blocks of text, or

messages absent of visuals or other graphic elements, than those that contained these features.

This study illustrates how digital admissions email marketing can have an effect on student decisions to apply to an institution. Based on these findings, suggestions for practitioners include the performance of a marketing audit to better understand their communication plans. This audit should result in an initiative to bring messages in line with the preferences and suggestions provided by the study's subjects, especially in areas such as email frequency, use of hyperlinks, and general email message layout, which should be optimized for mobile devices, or include a responsive design to permit consumption across devices. These suggestions will be further refined by additional research on this topic, including an expansion of the breadth and depth of this study, as well as a parallel study with other student populations, including non-resident first-time students and transfer students.

The findings of this study will contribute to efforts on behalf of colleges and universities to more accurately target potential students with effective and relevant email marketing messages. The need for this research, conducted at a large, state-institution, is clear, when one considers that much of the previous work has either focused predominantly on small, highly-selected private institutions (Schee, 2009) or an institution's experience over the student's personal experiences and attitudes (Huddleston, 2000; Newman, 2002; Schee, 2009; Moogan, 2011; Ziegenfus, 2015). By examining which aspects of digital admissions marketing have the greatest impact on prospective students, as evidenced by experiences shared during individual interview

sessions, college and university marketing practitioners may be able to more effectively communicate with prospective students and have a greater influence in their college-choice process.

APPENDIX A

Recruitment Email

Subject: George Mason University MAIS Thesis – Request for Participation

Dear XXX –

My name is Andrew E. Bunting, a MAIS Graduate Student in the Higher Education Program here at George Mason University. This semester, I am conducting research (IRBNet number 1120798-1) on student attitudes toward digital admissions marketing under the guidance of my Principal Investigator, Dr. Kelly Schrum.

As a UNIV 100/ HONORS 110 faculty member, students registered for your course may be the perfect subjects for this study. As such, I would like to request that you distribute the attached message to your students to see if any would like to participate in a one-time, 60-90 minute interview about their experiences while moving through their college search.

If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Andrew E. Bunting
MAIS – Higher Education Program
George Mason University

Begin Attachment:

Subject: George Mason University MAIS Thesis – Request for Participation

Hello and welcome to George Mason University!

My name is Andrew E. Bunting, a MAIS Graduate Student in the Higher Education Program here at George Mason University. This semester, I am conducting research

(IRBNet number 1120798-1) on student attitudes toward digital admissions marketing under the guidance of my Principal Investigator, Dr. Kelly Schrum.

As a UNIV 100/HONORS 110 student, you may qualify to participate in my study. Participation entails a one-time, 60-90 minute interview about your experiences while you were looking at college last year. Lite refreshments will be provided.

In order to be eligible to participate, you must meet certain requirements:

1. Are a first time, full-time freshmen (you never attended college before, and you are enrolled in at least 12 credits);
2. Attended all four years of high school in Virginia;
3. Are either 18 or 19 years of age;
4. Lived in Virginia for at least the past year; and
5. Started at Mason immediately following your graduation from high school.

If you are interested in participating, and you believe you meet the participation requirements, please send me an e-mail at abunting@gmu.edu to get more information about how to schedule your study session.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Andrew E. Bunting
MAIS – Higher Education Program
George Mason University

APPENDIX B

Confirmation and Denial Email

Subject: George Mason University MAIS Thesis – Student Confirmation

Dear XXX –

Thank you for your interest in being a participant in my study as part of the MAIS Higher Education Program (IRBNet number 1120798-1). This semester, I am conducting research on student attitudes toward digital admissions marketing under the guidance of my Principal Investigator, Dr. Kelly Schrum.

In order to be eligible to participate, you must meet certain requirements. Please send a response as soon as possible to certify that you:

1. Are a first time, full-time freshmen (you never attended college before, and you are enrolled in at least 12 credits);
2. Attended all four years of high school in Virginia;
3. Are either 18 or 19 years of age;
4. Lived in Virginia for at least the past year; and
5. Started at Mason immediately following your graduation from high school.

You must meet all of the requirements above in order to participate.

If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me. I look forward to hearing from you about your eligibility.

Sincerely,

Andrew E. Bunting
MAIS – Higher Education Program

George Mason University

Approval E-mail

Subject: George Mason University MAIS Thesis – Participation Approved

Thank you for your e-mail and confirmation.

Based on your responses, your participation for this study has been approved. You will receive a confirmation e-mail with scheduling logistics shortly so that you can select your preferred study session date.

Additionally, you will be assigned a study-related identification number which will be used in lieu of your name during the study.

You do not need to bring any items with you or prepare in any way. Light refreshments will be served.

I look forward to meeting you and learning more about your experiences when you were looking for colleges.

Sincerely,

Andrew E. Bunting
MAIS – Higher Education Program
George Mason University

Denial E-mail

Subject: George Mason University MAIS Thesis – Participation Denied

Thank you for your e-mail.

Unfortunately, based on the information you provided, you are not eligible to be a participant in this study. Thank you for your interest and have a great start to your Mason career!

Sincerely,

Andrew E. Bunting
MAIS – Higher Education Program
George Mason University

APPENDIX C

Informed Consent Form for Interviews

STUDENT ATTITUDES TOWARDS DIGITAL ADMISSIONS MARKETING

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

This research is being conducted to measure the extent to which students interacted, and were influenced by, digital admissions marketing prior to applying to the university. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to recall and share your experiences during your senior year of high school in relation to admission marketing, as well as review samples of e-mails you may have received and share your opinions of their effectiveness. Your participate will consist of a one-time, 60-90 minute individual interview session, to be held in a private room within George Mason University's Fenwick Library.

RISKS

There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this research.

BENEFITS

There are no benefits to you as a participant other than to further research in the field of digital marketing.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The data in this study will be confidential. Throughout the individual interview and discussion, your identification code will be used in lieu of your name. Furthermore, your name will not be included on the data collected during your interview session; your identification code will be used when giving your responses; through the use of an identification key, the researcher will be able to link your responses to your identity; and only the researcher will have access to the identification key.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party.

Only first-time, full-time freshmen, who attended and completed four years of high school within the Commonwealth of Virginia, and who are enrolled at George Mason immediately following the completion of high school are eligible for participation in this study. Study participants must be either 18 or 19 years of age. By signing this form, you acknowledge that you meet these participation criteria.

CONTACT

This research is being conducted by Andrew E. Bunting, Director of Admissions Operations, at George Mason University. He may be reached at abunting@gmu.edu or 703-993-3338 for questions or to report a research-related problem. This research is being supervised by Dr. Kelly Schrum, Associate Professor of History and Art History/ Higher Education. She may be reached at kschrum@gmu.edu, or 703-993-4521. You may also contact the George Mason University Institution Review Board (IRB) at irb@gmu.edu if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

AUDIO TAPING CONSENT

This research involves audio-taping your responses and the group discussion during your interview session. These audio recordings will be made with an audio recording device, which will be securely sent for audio transcription before being destroyed. During and following the study sessions, the recordings and recording device will be kept in a secure desk within the Office of Admissions. Only the investigators and transcript service will have access to the tapes at any time.

_____ I agree to audio (video) taping.

_____ I do not agree to audio (video) taping.

GENERAL CONSENT

I have read this form, all of my questions have been answered by the research staff, and agree to participate in this study.

Name

Date of Signature

APPENDIX D

Individual Interview Protocol

Individual Interview Location(s) – Fenwick Library (Private Room)

Individual Interview Time Frame – 1st semester of freshman year

Individual Interview Time(s) – 60 – 90 minutes

Recording Instrument –Independent recording device

Dates of transcription & Transcription Completion Date – TBD

Multiplicity of interview sessions – At least 8 individual interviews will be conducted. Each interview will follow the same format, though the conversations and direction will be different based on student participation and experiences.

- I. Opening Script
 - a. Hello, my name is Andrew E. Bunting, and I'd like to thank you for taking the time to come speak with me today. Over the course of the next 60 to 90 minutes we are going to have an open discussion about the choice you made when you were applying to college last year, and how some of the marketing you received may have affected those choices. My primary reason for asking these questions and conducting this research is that I am very interested to learn how digital admission marketing, specifically email communications, affect student decisions during this critical time. There are no right or wrong answers. I am mostly interested in getting to know you better, hearing your stories, and having you contribute to this body of knowledge.
 - i. Have students read and sign consent forms, which also include consent to be recorded, and review any questions regarding confidentiality
 - ii. Solicit questions before beginning
- II. ** Introductions with Identification Numbers Assigned & Discussion about 1st Semester (build rapport and ensure comfort) **
- III. Guiding Question #1
 - a. Last year, when you were in high school, how did you feel about applying to college? What were you excited for? What were you nervous for?
 - i. Conversation and follow up
- IV. Guiding Question #2
 - a. What made your choose to apply to one college over another?

- i. Conversation and follow up
- V. Guiding Question #3
 - a. How did you engage with the schools prior to starting your application? Did you email them? Visit? Talk on the phone?
 - i. Conversation and follow up
- VI. Guiding Question #4
 - a. What are some of the reasons you decided to study at Mason? How did you come to this decision? What did the process look like for you?
 - i. Conversation and follow up
- VII. Guiding Questions #5-8 (each participant will be asked to respond individually)
 - a. Last year, do you recall receiving marketing materials from colleges?
 - b. What type of materials do you remember receiving?
 - c. What did you like about these materials? Dislike?
 - d. How did you feel about receiving these materials?
 - i. Was there too much? Just enough? Not enough?
- VIII. Guiding Question #9
 - a. Of the admissions marketing materials you received, do you recall receiving digital admissions marketing materials from schools in which you were interested?
 - b. What type of digital marketing did you receive? Emails? Text messages? Social Media?
 - i. What did you like about these specific materials? Dislike?
 - ii. How did you feel about receiving these specific materials?
 - iii. Was there too much? Just enough? Not enough?
 - c. Additional follow up as needed
- IX. Guiding Question #10
 - a. Can you speak specifically about Mason's digital marketing? What were your reactions to that?
 - i. Conversations and follow up
- X. Guiding Question #11
 - a. How would you characterize your attitude to receiving this type of communication or overall influence digital marketed had on you and why? Influential? Moderately Influential? Minimally Influential?
 - i. Conversations and follow up
- XI. Guiding Question #12
 - a. Let's take a look at some specific examples of Mason's digital marketing campaign that a student with similar demographic information to you may have received.
 - i. Do you remember getting any of these messages?
 - ii. What do you like about these messages? What do you dislike?
 - iii. Why?

- XII. Guiding Question #13 – In what ways do you think this type of communication influenced your decision to choose Mason over another school? How would you characterize its influence?
 - i. Conversations and follow up (large push on this topic)
- XIII. Final thoughts and round robin share
- XIV. Closing Script
 - a. Thank you for participating in this interview. Please help yourself to the remaining snacks. I am always available via email at abunting@gmu.edu should you have any questions about the study. Please note that all of your names will be changed my final write-up, which I can make available to you at the completion of this study. Thank you again!

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BIOGRAPHY

Andrew E. Bunting graduated from Washington Township High School, Sewell, New Jersey, in 2007. He received his Bachelor of Arts from the University of Delaware in 2011. He is currently employed by George Mason University as the director of admissions operations, and received his Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies from George Mason University in 2019.