#BESTSCHOOLEVER:

A Mixed-Methods Analysis of How Institutions of Higher Education Utilize Social Media for Student Recruitment

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abstract:

Using a mixed methods approach that included interviews, surveys, and content analysis of a year's worth of Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter posts from five public and five private university's social media pages, THIS RESEARCH HOPES TO GATHER INSIGHT OF HOW UNIVERSITY PROGRAMS USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO INTERACT WITH STUDENTS TO INFORM, PREPARE AND RECRUIT THEM FOR HIGHER EDUCATION. Using a critical theory approach, it was determined that social media was used as a tool for framing the academic priorities of the university, as reflected by social media related to on-campus research, affiliations, recognitions, and student life. However, it should be noted that the posts seemed to be selectively focusing on particular themes, i.e. student research in the STEM fields, done with the intention of targeting particular students in an attempt to sway their attention to apply to a particular university. Implications leads to the conclusion that while universities use social media to subtly deliver messages of their undergraduate and graduate programs, each university focusing on delivering a constructed message that is in accordance with their own institutional self-interest.
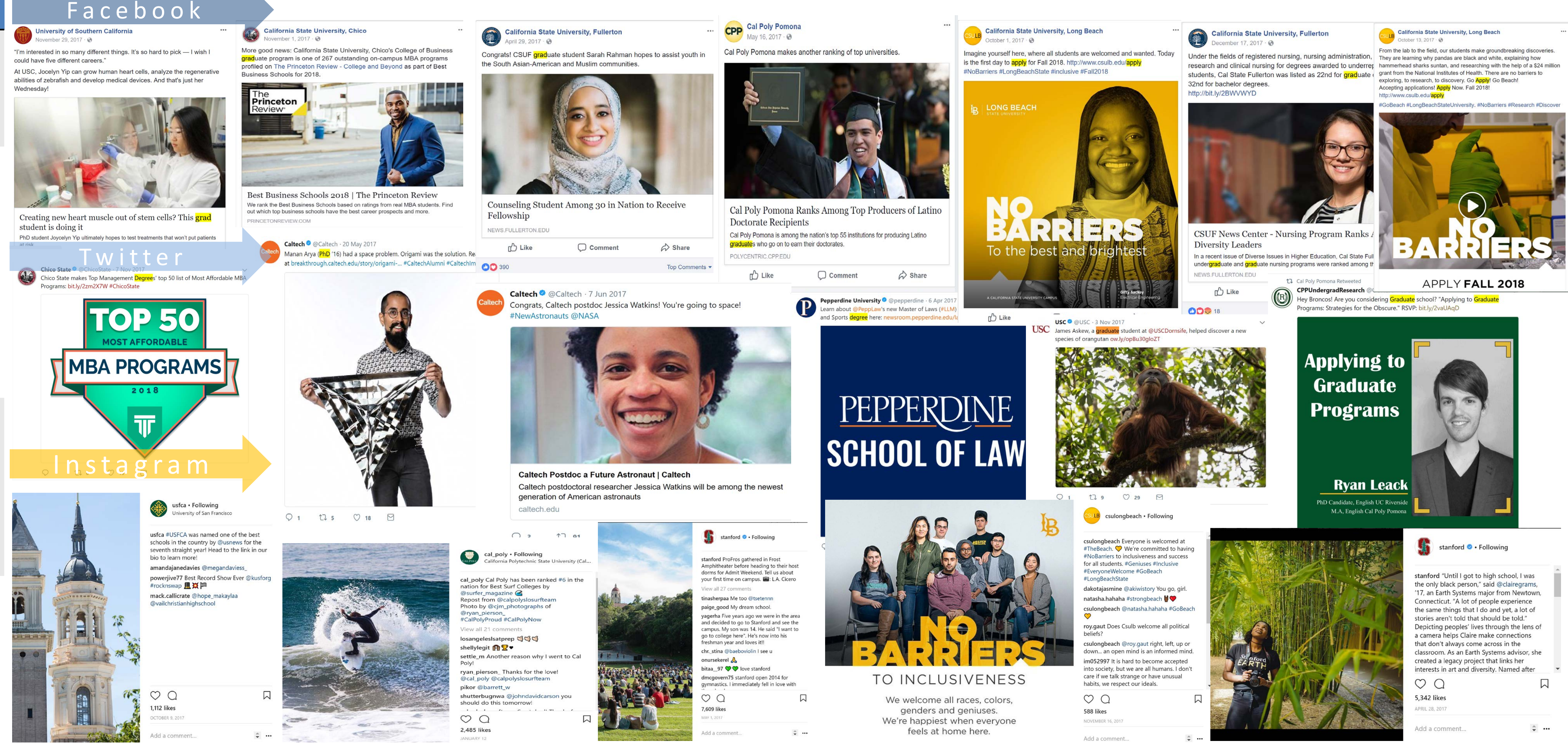
RESEARCH QUESTION: How are institutions of higher education using **social media** as a tool to advertise, inform and recruit prospective students to their programs

methods:

Content Analysis: qualitative coding

Private	Public (CSU)
Stanford U.	Cal Poly Pomona
Caltech	Cal Poly SLO
U. Southern California	CSU Fullerton
Pepperdine U.	CSU Chico
U. San Francisco	CSU Long Beach

- Survey - Qualtrics online software
- Open-ended interview

results:

Categorical Subjects of Social Media Posts

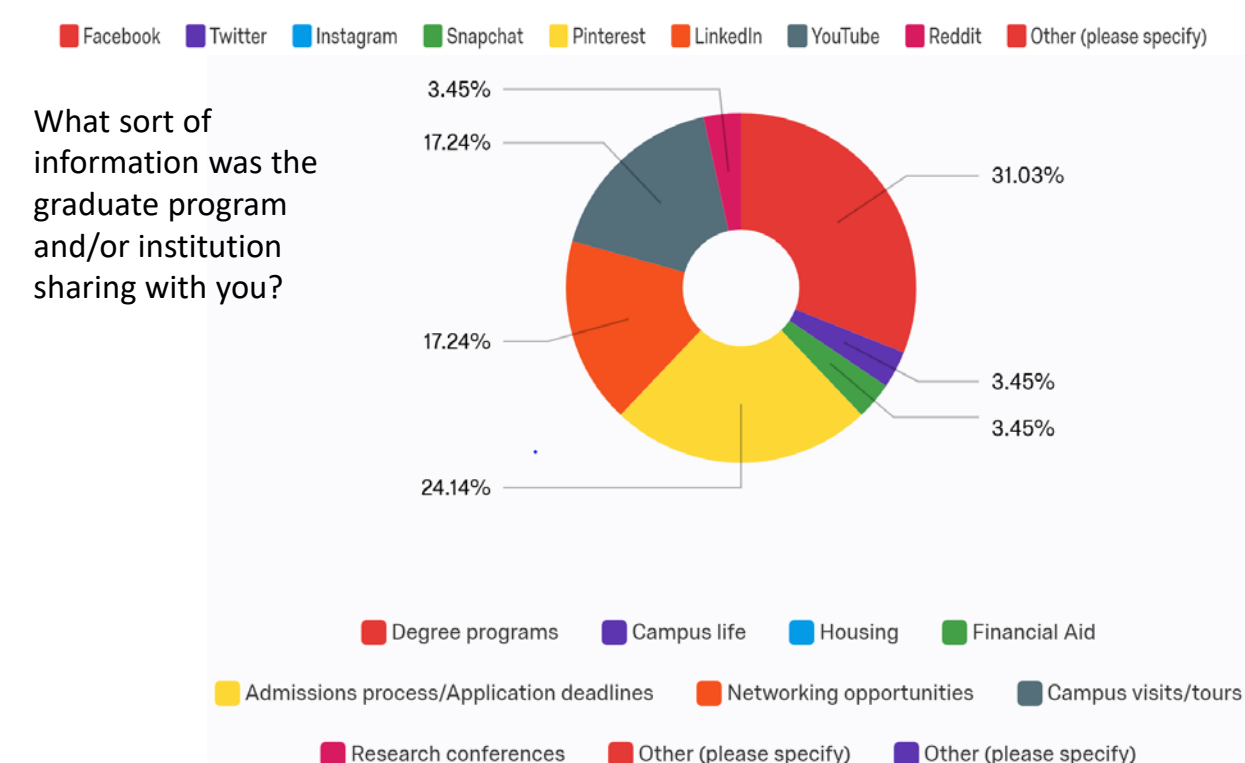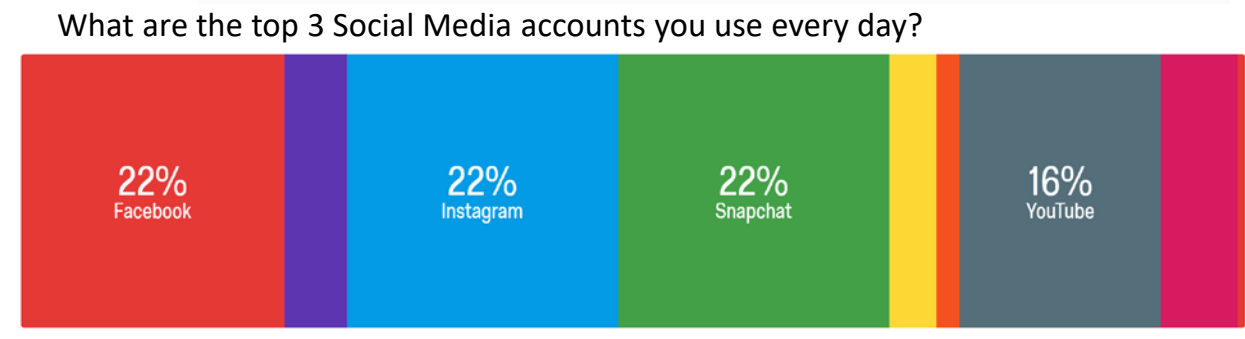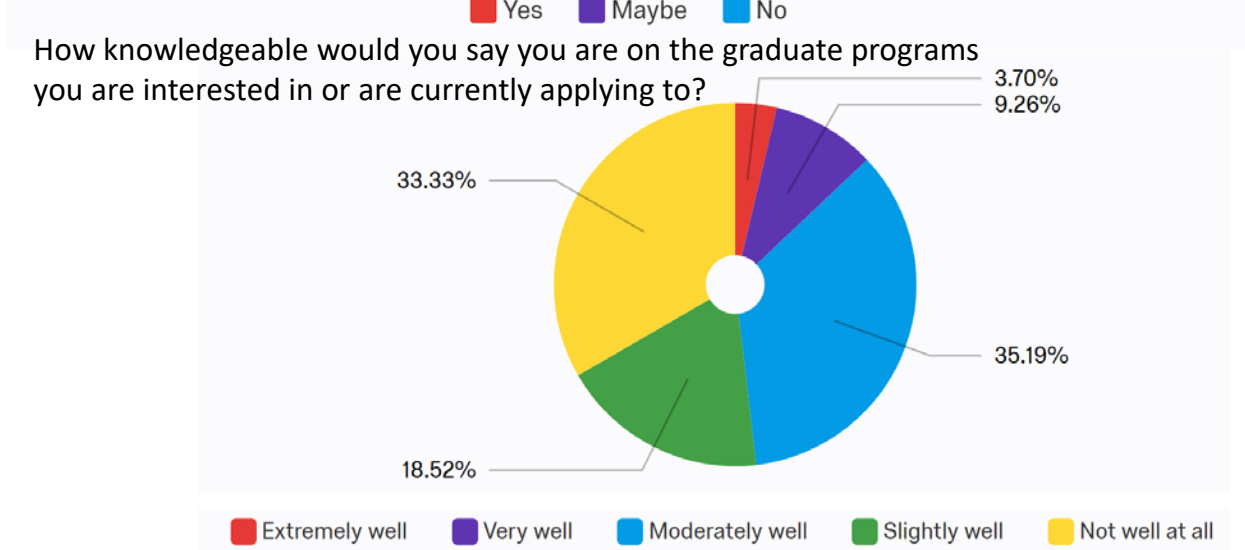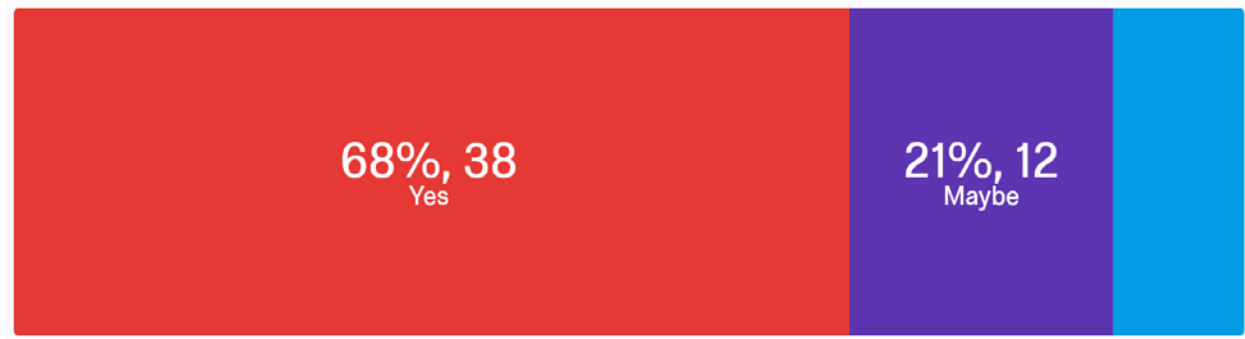| Subject	Definition
On-campus Research	Post will include information of past, on-going, or future research being conducted at the university by students or faculty members. Research will usually be original and /or groundbreaking. Ex: Stanford research team being the first to complete successful human heart transplant.
Affiliations	Post will include information regarding affiliations with people (students/faculty), places, goals/achievements or things that is traditionally recognizable to the school. Ex: USC and football
Recognitions	Recognition of a person/place/thing and provide a brief narrative of what it is/who they are and what makes it worth commemorating. Recognitions can be of the past or present; not necessarily in current existence. Ex: Nobel prize winning professors; students being accepted into PhD program.
Campus/Student Life	Post will provide information or updates of student and campus activities, traditions, environment. Ex: Cal Poly agriculture/farm-life; CSULB beach life; commencement.
Apply	Post will contain information encouraging/directing the viewer to apply to a certain program, event, or degree. Ex: reminder for approaching Fall enrollment deadlines.

Note: in some instances more than one category can be used to describe a single post on social media.

Through in depth content analysis, survey data, and interview, implications point to social media (SM) having an important role between students and universities. While most students express interests in higher education, an increased understanding of university programs can be achieved through the dissemination of meaningful content via SM networks. SM is reflected as capable of reproducing and maintaining school ideology, which can affect student decision.

themes:

Do you play to pursue graduate school after completing your graduate training, whether immediately following graduating or in the upcoming years?

68%, 38 Yes | 21%, 12 Maybe

How knowledgeable would you say you are on the graduate programs you are interested in or are currently applying to?
3.70%, 9.26%, 33.33%, 35.19%, 18.52%
Extremely well | Very well | Moderately well | Slightly well | Not well at all

What are the top 3 Social Media accounts you use every day?
22% Facebook | 22% Instagram | 22% Snapchat | 16% YouTube
Facebook | Twitter | Instagram | Snapchat | Pinterest | LinkedIn | YouTube | Reddit | Other (please specify)

What sort of information was the graduate program and/or institution sharing with you?
3.45%, 17.24%, 31.03%, 17.24%, 3.45%, 3.45%, 24.14%
Degree programs | Campus life | Housing | Financial Aid | Admissions process/Application deadlines | Networking opportunities | Campus visits/tours | Research conferences | Other (please specify) | Other (please specify)

CONTENT ANALYSIS (of social media posts)
Framing an Image…
- PUBLIC: emphasis in: 1. promoting the institution as competitive to other top-ranking universities in the United States 2. student life, inclusivity, and opportunities for student success
- PRIVATE: emphasis placed towards on-campus research activity and the work of graduate students and professional staff. Research, for example, becomes the normative expectation, in effect, branding the university by the predominant outward "presentation of self," presented via social media

…maintaining the ideology.
- Most universities are hold longtime "things-they-are-known-for" factors that aid in the maintaining of their school image, i.e: CPP = agriculture and engineering school; Caltech = tech/astronomy campus. This creates a kind of "affiliation through recognition" serves as a self-sustaining market campaign that promotes institutional interest. Additionally, participant activity on social media aid universities in the re-propagation of media through their comments, sharing, and liking of online posts—creates a pattern of the consumption of self-produced media.

Critical Connection
- MISLEADING REPRESENTATIONS: attention must be given to the ethnic, gendered, and class demographic that is being portrayed in media AND HOW IT COMPARES to the ACTUAL representation within the university's enrolled student body; question the motive, analyze and assess the reality, and to who's ultimately benefitting from these endeavors
- THE PRIVILEGE OF PARTICIPATION: what groups within the university body are allowed to self-represent on social media, who CONTROLS this procedure, and which groups PROFITS (financially and symbolically) ex: emphasis on STEM over Social Science research (think funding: effects on student decision to enroll, diversity of student body, potential for student success).

INTERVIEW
- Social media posts generally lack substantial, useful information regarding undergraduate and/or graduate programs
- However, participants share that social media is usually not a primary tool used to learn about universities of interest.

SURVEY
- Sample indicates majority interest amongst undergraduate students to pursue graduate school education
- However, most possess limited understanding and/or knowledge of programs of interest
- Likewise, few students have encountered or used social media as a medium for learning about higher-ed programs
- Social media confirms to have a positive effect in a students understanding of the university, and contributing to the subsequent decision to applying to universities of interest.

Rate of appearance of people of color (POC) in social media posts

Person Type	Rate of appearance	Total
POC Male	25	60 (POC)
POC Female	35	
White Male	14	33 (White)
White Female	19	