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Social Media Engagement As A New Way To Bond

By

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A capstone project submitted for Graduation with University Honors

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University Honors

University of California, Riverside

APPROVED

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Abstract

Social media engagement within institutions who are seeking to cater to their audience has been a persistent and developing phenomenon in the past few years. It is important that all participants understand how to engage with social media and the consequences it brings. Engagement is used to track popularity among accounts, and this popularity brings forth a sensation of closeness. The more interactions there are with people on these accounts, the more the digital bond forms. In order to develop the student community, one must understand what students are interested in and make that the base of social networking. Through tracking the insights of the University Honors social media accounts eg. Instagram, Facebook, Twitter after posting specific content weekly, I hope to produce research that will help generate personalized posts. Those posts can help students engage with University Honors social media accounts, and augment the bond between them and the institution. My hypothesis is that students like to engage with content that includes their peers, faculty, alumni, because it brings forth the notion of closeness and hence a bond. By using quantitative data, I tracked insights weekly of the specific posts I was evaluating and recorded this data on an excel sheet. After the designated time frame, my hypothesis was reinforced through this study. People following the University Honors accounts did engage more with content that included other people. Moving forward, this allows Honors accounts to post content that will increase our engagement therefore enhancing our bond with students.

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Introduction

Subconsciously, the way we interact on social media has consequences such as creating an outcome known as fluctuation in engagement. Corporations and other organizations agree that the more engagement the better. “Social media is one of the most efficient forms of information dissemination and sharing today”(Lund and Wang,4). Consequently, we want people to be engaging with the University Honors social media accounts. If social media is the most efficient form to communicate, we want our Honors information to be viewed. Interactions between universities and students allows for bonds to be reinforced which in turn creates high quality relationships. (Lund and Wang,4-5). We want to have high-quality relationships with our students and alumni. These “high-quality relationships” are achieved through digital bonds. The term digital bond is a bond that is created and enabled through the use of social media. This bond is maintained through likes, comments, responses and reactions of content. There does not need to be a formal introduction to form a digital bond. Simply, interacting on social media is enough to sustain this bond.

University Honors is a program within the University of California, Riverside that “engages a diverse community of students, faculty, and staff in the creation of global citizens through high-impact experiences that emphasize original scholarship, contribution and innovation” (University Honors). The University Honors program encourages students to engage in creative research while providing great opportunities and resources to them. While working as a Social Media Specialist for University Honors, I observed that students tend to interact more with our content when other people are present within the picture or video being shared. Whether it was students, faculty or alumni, the engagement was exponentially higher. In terms of comments, as well as likes , there was a notable increase in interaction when people are visible in

the content, known as digital bond, as expressed earlier. You are more likely to interact with content if you know the person in the picture, whether it's personally or you've just seen them around because you want to maintain this digital bond with others. In order for the University Honors accounts to keep growing, we need to nourish the digital bond. We must recognize our followers' interests. The purpose of this study is to bring concrete evidence of what students like to engage with on social media. This evidence can then help the University Honors sites, or any institutional accounts, curate content that will increase engagement.

Literature Review

Social Media As a Marketing Tool to Enhance the Digital Bond

As social media technology advances, so do the reasons for its usage. Social media accounts are now prevalent in university marketing. All university programs, clubs, and resource centers have social media accounts. Social networking allows for communication to be done efficiently and reach wider audiences, which was not happening before. We have to utilize the capability of social media to its full extent.

The influence social media has on its users is immense. Owners of institutional accounts have to carefully curate what they want to put out. "Student affairs staff had primary responsibility for organizing and conducting many of the most important activities and events that introduced students to the institution and their student peers and assimilated them into campus life" (Dalton and Crosby,3). Student affairs had to specifically curate posts with these events and activities in order to get the attendance rate up. While running the Honors accounts, I would also have to do this. I knew that if I simply posted an infographic it would not get much engagement, leading to a lesser turnout at the event. If I posted a video or a picture of someone

promoting the event, the engagement would be higher which would possibly lead to a successful event. We want these events to be successful which is why our social media campaigning has to also be interactive and successful. “Through social media such as Facebook, students today not only learn about college student life directly, but also participate in student life through online communication and interaction even before they set foot on campus!” (Dalton and Crosby, 3). Students use these sites to interact with similar peers in order to enhance their bond with one another. When posting on Honors, we want students to be engaging with our content because it creates a sense of community for students that may not be as interactive. It is encouraging for other students when we post content with other Honors students or Honors faculty and we have people commenting. It allows us to see that people enjoy that content, and it magnifies the digital bond.

Social media can be used as a positive resource to feel connected to the school one chooses to go to. This connection to the school reinforces the bond students have with the content they chose to engage with. “This paper reports on a social media intervention intended to increase connections among incoming college students with the goal of augmenting their feelings of connectedness to the university,...” (DeAndrea et al.,15) Just like my research, they also wanted to have their students feel connected to their university through social media. This can be achieved by making sure the content posted by these social media sites is engaging enough. If students are interacting with said content, they will feel closer to the institutions and the communities they are a part of.

Building Communities and Enhancing Relationships

Instagram is one of the most popular social media sites. Enhancing relationships with the use of social media is the main objective of all these sites. Instagram is one of the most widely

used platforms with 84% users and 53% of them using Instagram at least an hour a day (Thomas et al., 6). It is important to acknowledge what social media apps get utilized the most when planning what content you want to post. The more someone goes on an app, the higher the chances your specific content will get interacted with. “The most engaging posts featured photos of the *A Crecer* research team...and ways to get involved in the community” (Thomas et al., 9). I bring attention to these two results because they are both relevant to the research I did. Much like my research, I also found that people interact more with content that had other people in it, just as this Instagram research project found that the content with the most interactions for them was content with their research team. Not only that, but also the content that allowed people to be involved within their community. This reinforces the concept of the digital bond. People want to feel a part of something. Instagram has potential to be an influential device when promoting participant engagement and building community support (Thomas et al., 12). If you are building communities, you are creating bonds. This can be done simply through social media usage. It is important to see what content is being interacted with the most because that is what people want to see. If they like the content they are being exposed to, they will interact with it more therefore enhancing the relationship and strengthening the digital bond.

Facebook was once the ruling social media site. As time goes by, Instagram seems to now be the ruler of digital media. Instagram is being used within educators, especially now with remote learning. “Educators employed Instagram to acquire and share knowledge, as well as to exchange emotional support and develop community” (Carpenter et al., 9). The concept of community is yet again introduced. The research done in the field of digital media, specifically social media, focuses on this concept of community. Through community, institutions are able to

monetize their content and increase engagement. The main point of social media is that the more engagement the better.

The emerging research being investigated is of crucial importance to the digital world because it addresses the importance of social media engagement in reinforcing bonds. They all bring forth related topics that will only keep revolutionizing the way these sites work. Users' experience is all that matters, and the more personalized social media sites become the better the experience. If a company or individual's feed is customized in a way that catches users' attention, their interaction with the site increases. Enforcing the digital bond is the main objective of increasing interactions.

The research regarding social media has become prevalent during these past couple of years. The research I have found on this topic is an extensive amount that roughly starts from 2012 and continues until present time. One can infer that the research being done on digital media is about to increase exponentially in following years. This research will continue to be sought out since digital media is a growing sensation.

All of the research articles had the same concept of community and bonds through social media, but my research specifically focused on the type of content one should post to increase engagement. I curated weekly content for three months to be able to accurately track what Honors followers interact with the most. The approach I took differs from current research approaches in digital media because I focused on interactions and engagement. Most of the research previously done, did have components of social media and emphasized the concept of community, but none of them focused on actual interactions and what these interactions imply. We need to be aware of what type of content increases engagement. My approach was intended

to allow us to understand what content to post when the goal is for engagement to increase since engagement is the driving force in digital media.

Setting and Student Population

The setting for this study takes place on the University Honors social media accounts of Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. The University Honors program at the University of California, Riverside “engages a diverse community of students, faculty, and staff in the creation of global citizens through high-impact experiences that emphasize original scholarship, contribution, creativity and innovation” (University Honors). They have three pillars of excellence they like to emphasize within this program. These pillars are “Cultivating a Culture of Contribution”, “Promoting Creativity and Innovation”, and Celebrating Diversity & Global Citizenship.” The Honors program prides itself in being diverse and inclusive because it provides opportunities to all in the program. With this pride comes the responsibility that we are creating and posting content that reflects the Honors three pillars of excellence.

The University Honors accounts are set to public so anyone has access to them and can interact with our content. There is no need to be in Honors to interact with the content. Although, the majority of people who follow are current Honors students, alumni or faculty. People who are interested in joining also interact with our account. Anything posted on these accounts is targeted for people who have an affiliation with Honors because we want to raise awareness to events, activities and resources within Honors.

Procedure

For this research project, I decided to focus on the Instagram, Facebook and Twitter accounts of University Honors. The logic behind choosing these three University Honors accounts to focus on was because these are the social media sites that get the most traction. The quantitative data collection started in the fall quarter from October 2021 to December 2021. I wanted my data collection to occur during a natural occurring time we utilize these accounts more, which is when school is in session.

The content I posted was either solely person based, infographics, or a mix of both-people and infographics. Examples of person based content would be a picture of students at an event hosted by Honors or a video of the Honors director promoting an event by encouraging students to attend, etc. Therefore, person based content is anything with people visibly in it that enhances the digital bond. Examples of infographics are flyers promoting an Honors event. An example of mixed content are posts with people visibly in it, flyers promoting an event or campus pictures such as our bell tower or campus buildings that invoke a sense of community. Mixed content was not just one or the other, it was all content being posted that week. One week I would post only infographics, the following week I would post content with people in it, and the following week would be a mix of both. This weekly content change went on for a time span of three months. Every Monday I would track the insights of the previous week, through appropriate analytic features these sites contain and write them down on an Excel spreadsheet. These analytic features would differ from social media accounts but for Instagram I used the Insight feature, for Facebook I used the Professional Dashboard feature, and for Twitter it was Twitter Analytics. Every analytics feature has different data metrics they track. For this research project, I decided to track the ones that seemed fit for tracking engagement and would

give me the most accurate data for each site. For Instagram I focused on accounts reached, profile visits, and content interactions. For Facebook I focused on page views, post reach, and post engagement, and for Twitter I focused on tweet impressions per 7 days, impressions per day, and likes. These metrics give the most detailed data of what content gets the most engagement.

To ensure all content was being posted on these three sites at the same time, I utilized Later, which is a content scheduler platform. There was no specific time in which I would post content every week because this research project focused on interactions and engagement not the optimal time to post content. What I would try to do was post content during the same time frame, so if I posted content on a Monday at 12pm, all three sites would get the content posted at 12pm that day. That is when the Later platform would be of service, to ensure content was being posted for all three sites. For Instagram, I would make sure to also repost our feed content to our stories. This is a tactic done to get our content to reach more followers since content on feeds can get lost.

Time and consistency was not a defining feature in this research project , although content was posted approximately three to four times a week, depending on how much content was given for us to post. The main concept of this procedure was to notice an increase in engagement when only content featuring other students, faculty or alumni was posted.

Results

After the three month data collection period was over, my hypothesis was supported. Individuals did interact more with content that had other people featured on it versus content that was just infographics. There was an increase in engagement in the metrics recorded on all three social media sites. Whether it was a significant difference or a minimal one in engagement, the increase was there. We can see this increase in Figure 1. Using Instagram's insight feature, I tracked the accounts reached, profile visits and content interactions. The accounts reached indicate how many accounts saw our content, profile visits illustrate how many people clicked on our profile, and content interactions are how many accounts actually interacted with our content. That includes likes, comments, shares and saves. The blue illustrates week three interactions where only infographics were posted while week four illustrates interactions where only content with people was posted. There was a 138.3% increase between week three content and week four.

The accounts reached during week three were 548, the profile visits were 135 and the content interactions were 49. The accounts reached during week four were 1,112, profile visits were 269 and content interactions were 363. This reflects that our followers visibly enjoy interacting more with content that features people in it such as students, faculty or alumni. The percentage increase in accounts reached when going from week three content to week four was 102.9% , profile visits was 99.3% and content interactions was 640.8%. This was due to the fact that our weekly content changed allowed our followers to feel as though they are part of a community and therefore enhancing the digital bond. Consequently, we saw a dramatic increase in all three columns when comparing week three content to week four content. From the data

collected through Instagram’s Insight feature, people like to interact significantly more with content that contains peers, staff, faculty, etc.

Instagram

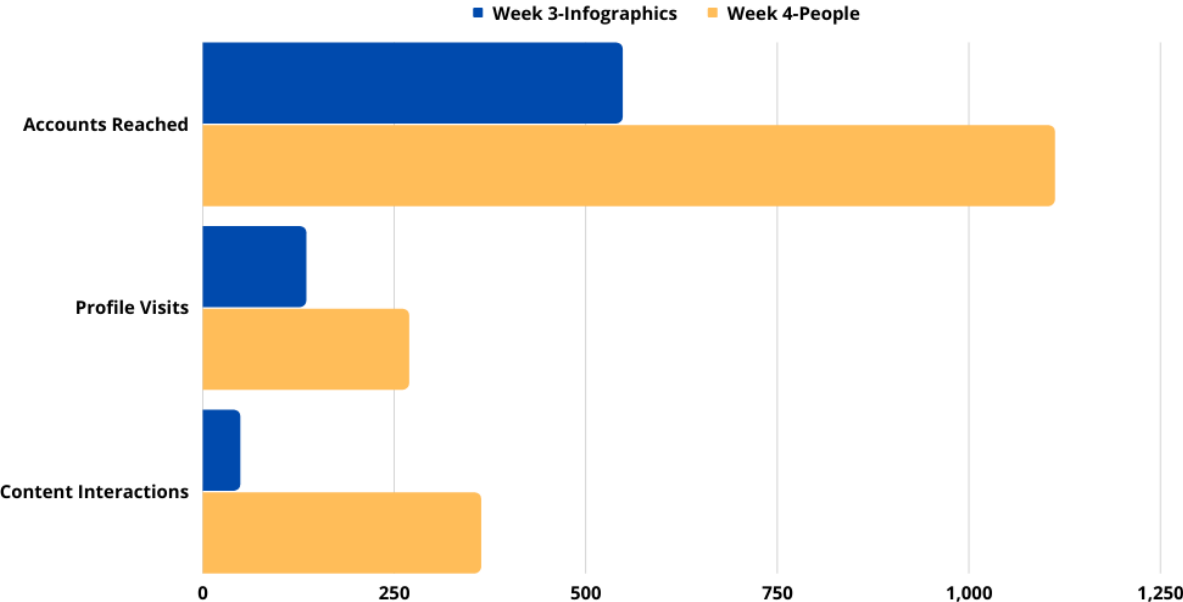


Figure 1. Instagram Insights

This increase in engagement happened within Facebook as well. The Facebook insights depicted in Figure 2. are page views, post reach, and post engagement. Page views signifies the amount of times someone has viewed our page, post reach lets us know the number of users who saw our content, and post engagement is when someone actually engages with our content such as likes, comments and shares. The Facebook insight feature allowed for us to note a 73.3% increase in engagement when we switched content from infographics to people. The page views for week three, when only infographics were posted were 9, the post reach was 243, and the post engagement was 6. Week four there was a shift in content where only people-based content was posted, which led to the increase in engagements. The page views increased to 11, the post reach was 395, and the post engagement was 41. Page views only had a two increment increase, but an increase nonetheless. The percentage increase in page views when switching content was 22.2%, post reach was 62.6% , and for post engagement 583.3%. This percentage increase highlights once more the increase seen when only posting content with people. This increase portrays the concept of the digital bond since social media users are actively engaging more with content that features other people in it because they feel a connection with this specific content.

Facebook

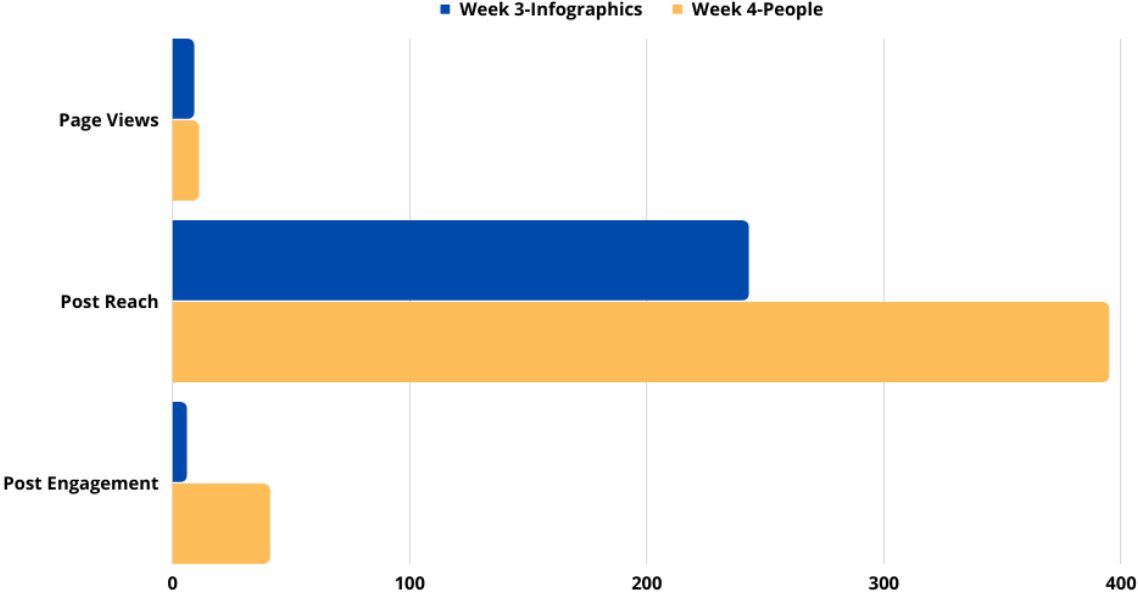


Figure 2. Facebook Insights

Twitter, Figure 3., also had an increase in engagement when switching from only posting infographics to only posting content with people. The insight features I focused on for Twitter were tweet impressions per 7 days, impressions per day and likes. The impressions on Twitter reflect the amount of times the tweet was seen. The likes are simply just how many likes we received on our tweets. Twitter had an average increase of 95.5% in engagement when switching from infographics to people content. Week three started off with 529 tweet impressions per day, 52 impressions and 0 likes. It then increased to 993 tweet impressions per day, 140 impressions and 3 likes during week four. Tweet impressions per day had a 87.7% increase, impressions per day had a 169.2% increase. No matter what social media site we decided to focus on, there was an increase as the content transitioned from infographics only to content with people. This data collection reflects and reinforces my hypothesis that people interact more with content that includes people such as students, faculty, or alumni which strengthens the concept of the digital bond. People want to feel a connection with the content they interact with.

Twitter

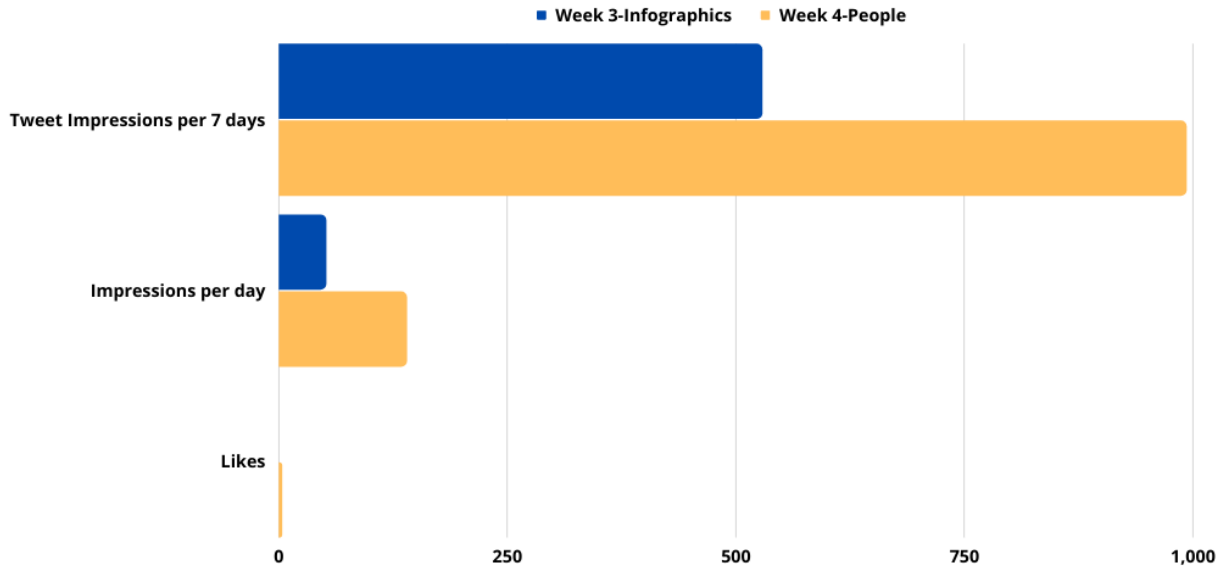


Figure 3. Twitter Insights

Instagram and Twitter both have an insight metric called “impressions,” which is a metric that tracks how many times the content we posted was seen. Figures 4 and 5 illustrate the data collected from week five, which consisted of a mix of people (MOE) content and infographics, and week six, which was just people content. We can see the increase when going to a mixture of content to solely content with students, faculty and alumni in it. In Figure 4. Instagram increased from 3,420 impressions to 4,183 the following week. This is a 22.3% increase in impressions. With this increase, it becomes clear what content our followers prefer to see on their feeds, and that content is solely people based. Figure 5. Twitter went from 1.3k impressions to 5.7k the following week as well. This depicts a 338.5% increase. When only content of students, faculty or alumni is posted on Twitter, it is shown significantly more than combined with infographics. This highlights the importance of understanding what content we should be posting for University Honors because it is clear what content Honors followers like to engage with the most. Content with people in it is the content that gets shown on their feed more, whether it's the algorithms or people sharing the content, it is ultimately what followers like to see based on the data that was collected. It helps the followers feel as though they truly are part of a community.

Figure 4. Instagram Impressions

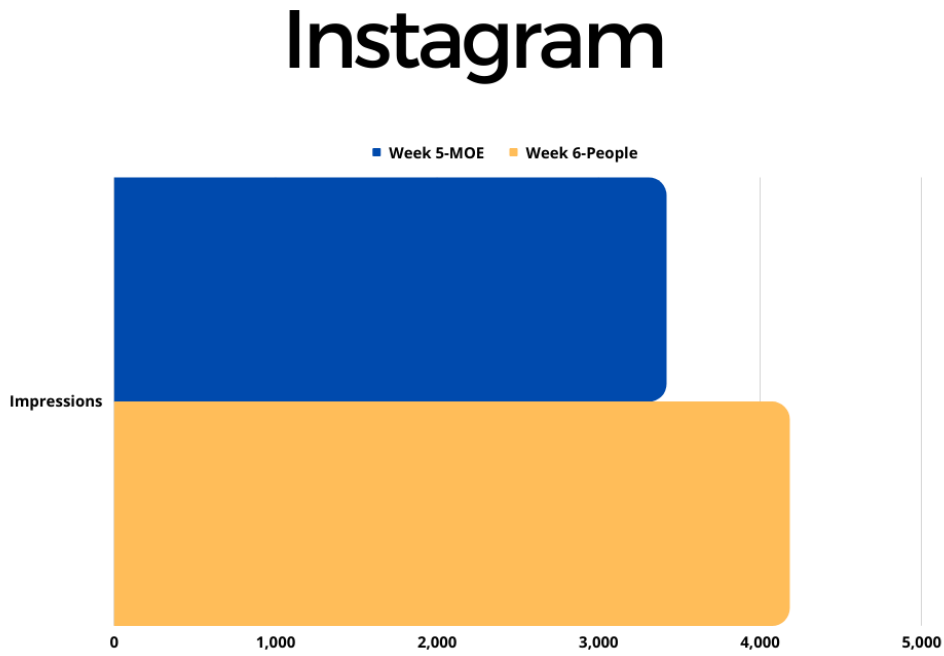
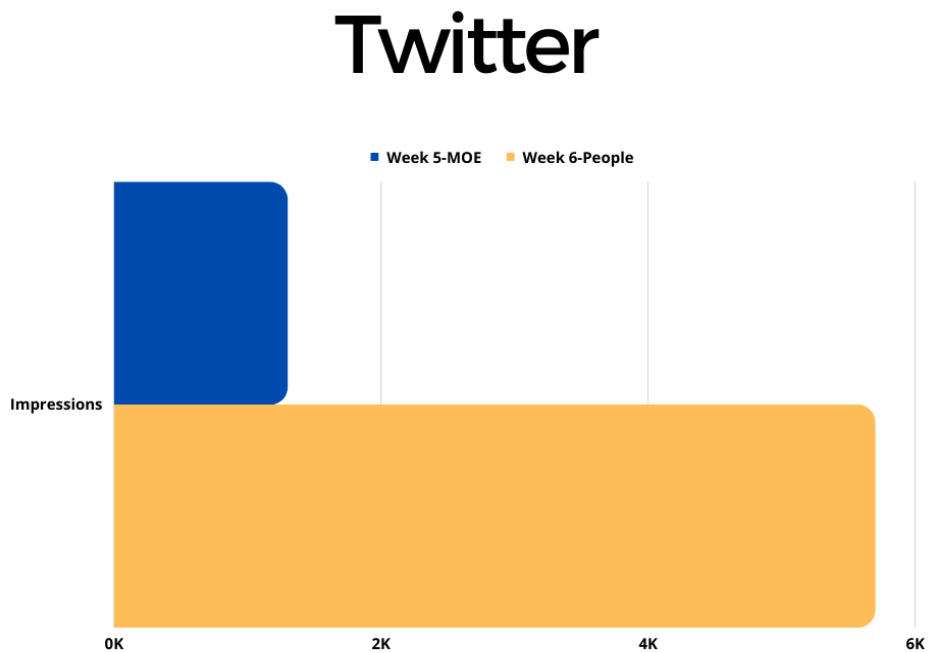


Figure 5. Twitter Impressions



Discussion

This discovery is important to the phenomenon of digital media because it will allow people to understand what content will provide more engagement, and the most important tactic in the digital media world is to constantly have engagement increasing. We can see that Instagram tends to have more interactions overall. “Instagram are the most popular social media platforms among adolescents, with 85% and 72%, respectively, of 13–17-year-olds using them. Use of social media has been recognized as a promising tool to enhance and facilitate research with adolescents” (Thomas, et. al, 2). I would also argue that not only is it popular with 13-17 year olds, it is also popular among college students. It is where the majority of them get their information regarding events on their college campus. That is why we must post content that catches their attention. Now that we know that University Honors students interact with people content more, we must post this content when trying to increase attendance at events. If this content is what is getting reached more often, that is the content we should be promoting.

When we put into perspective how many people use social media, it becomes apparent that we should use our accounts to promote University Honors. “As of 2014, 74 percent of Internet users in general and 89 percent of young adults aged between 18 and 29 in the United States reported that they used social media” (Kim et al., 264). If 89% of young adults are using these social media accounts such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter we must provide content they are interested in. The more interesting content we post, the more interactions we will obtain. The findings from this study help reinforce what content we should be focused on creating. “The main reasons that college students use social media are in touch with their family and friends to know about social activities, and to feel connected” (Kim et al.,264). These three main concepts that emphasize why college students use social media are the exact reason we have a University

Honors account. That is to foster the digital bond. We want Honors students to see their friends in Honors, to know what events are going on in Honors and to feel a bond with the Honors community. These are our three main goals, and in order to achieve this we must make sure our engagement is constantly increasing.

An important tool for establishing social bonds and social well being is social media (Dirin et al., 91). Using social media accounts as a method to establish social bonds reinforces the concept of the digital bond. We want people affiliated with Honors to have a bond with us. That will provide us and the students with the best Honors experience. This study is of great importance to the emerging notion of digital media. Trends come and go, but what always matters is engagement. If we want to successfully reach students' accounts, we must know what they enjoy to see on their feeds.

Limitations

Due to the wide scope of digital media, there were a couple of limitations. Our social media accounts were public, meaning that anyone could interact with the content at any given time. Although they are designated for people with an affiliation with Honors, anyone is allowed to interact. Not only is anyone allowed to interact, but the algorithms do not show content chronologically. It is possible to post on a specific day and have it show up on someone's feed days later. This posed a problem to the study because although content was posted for specific weeks, it could get interactions whenever. That means if I was posting only infographic content it was possible that someone could like a picture with people on it and that engagement would be counted towards the work of infographics only. This could also happen if someone was going on our account and liking content instead of the content organically showing up on their feed.

Although these discrepancies were a possibility, the data collected during the three month period still supports my argument that people interact more with content that features students, faculty or alumni.

Conclusion

When used thoughtfully, social media can bring forth the most amazing results in terms of spreading information. Our main goal in University Honors is to have our students engaged with our program because Honors encourages a sense of community. We can accomplish this by creating meaningful content with people, infographics, and mixed- content that reels them in to enhance the digital bond. Through the data I collected in this study, the notion of increasing engagement with content that included other students, faculty, or alumni was supported. This fluctuation in engagement allows for the future University Honors Social Media Specialist to curate content that will allow our social media sites to always have increasing interactions.

By focusing on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter I was able to conclude that no matter what the site is, engagement declines when content goes from people to infographics. The more information we gather on how our sites work better, the better content we can schedule. Social media accounts for every institution can slightly differ in what their audience wants to interact with. This research helps institutions and individuals figure out what content to schedule to their social media sites now that there is awareness of the positive relationship between people based content and engagement. The magnitude of social media screen time is increasing as the years go by. Since we know this phenomenon is growing, we must keep up with its updated features to allow our content to keep getting viewed and interacted with. Our goal is to increase our engagement which will enhance our digital bond and strengthen the Honors community.

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