Seeking Information Online:
A Study of Interpersonal Interactions on an Online College Review Forum

By

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Abstract

Online review and discussion forums are a popular way consumers seek information about products, vacation destinations, and restaurants. They provide consumers with the unique opportunity to bypass the voice of the expert or company owner. The increasingly high-stakes and ambiguous U.S. college admissions process leads prospective college students and parents to utilize college review forums to ask questions and seek information from peers, current college students, and even admissions counselors online. These conversations can often be characterized as brutally honest and subject to scrutiny but are viewed by thousands of users like those found on College Confidential. Although current communication studies have examined the impact product and restaurant reviews have on their viewers, research has not analyzed the impact of the information presented in a high-stakes setting like the college search and selection process. To study the types of questions and information users share online, as well as response patterns and credential disclosure, I performed a content analysis of 48 conversation threads from a popular online college review forum. Results found that while most of the requests for information came from prospective college students, the majority of users who provided information supplied no information by which to be identified. I conclude that information produced by anonymous users online is apparently trusted to a greater degree than one might think, although users successfully provide requested information.

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Introduction

Online Reviews and the College Admissions Process

"When I'm not walking backwards and rambling off facts about the University, I'm currently working on a thesis analyzing the detailed conversations prospective students like you are having online about choosing where to attending college!" This declaration has almost always been met with wide eyes, questioning glances, and faces of denial as I begin an hour-and-a-half-long tour of the University of Illinois campus with prospective students and families. And for good reason; according to College Confidential's company website, over 300,000 prospective students and families visit the site each month, each with their own agenda to read, ask, and discuss the many aspects of the college admissions process (College Confidential, 2015). That's not to mention the vast number of visitors flocking to similar sites, like Unigo, Reddit, or the College Prowler for information to guide them during the college search and selection process. Despite each site's unique characteristics, each offers a shared objective: to provide a space for prospective students to ask and answer questions that will guide them through the college admissions process, from their initial search efforts to their final days before moving into the university they are about to call "home."

The unique opportunity for students to aid others from across the world as they navigate the college admissions process is comparable to the objectives of users planning a vacation with the aid of TripAdvisor or Yelp. The online conversations between prospective college students yield thousands of discussion threads between seemingly curious individuals and apparently knowledgeable strangers. However, the modern

prospective college students' reliance on these sites calls into question the credibility of their users, as well as the type of information being represented online. Previous research on information retrieval practices, online communication, and background on the changing admissions process in the United States have explored many of the ways and reasons individuals exchange information online. However, no studies have identified the specific implications for users of online college review forums.

This paper will outline the content analysis I conducted in hopes of finding relationships between the types of information requested and provided between anonymous users online. My findings will shed light on the valuable information exchanges taking place between users facing high levels of uncertainty. This study will also provide needed insight regarding the reliability of information and its authors in online conversations, the types of personal disclosures made on online forums, and the reasons and ways individuals request and provide information online.

Literature Review

Since the arrival of Internet technologies, consumers and businesses have taken to the web not only to advertise their products, but to provide consumers the opportunity to share their experiences with products. Examples of these sites include Yelp, Amazon's product review section, and TripAdvisor. These sites contain reviews and discussions about a wide array of topics, from restaurants to washing machines. A 2012 Nielsen Survey found that in 70% of cases, consumers trust and make informed decisions based on online consumer reviews (Nielsen, 2012).

In a completely different but evolutionary way, prospective college students are making use of college forums that provide a space for information provisions without the

"admissions' office twist" former college Admissions Counselor, Brian Albertsen added in an interview. "Peer-to-peer conversation is actually treated just as student-to-admissions counselor conversations to them" (Albertsen, 2014). But with stakes higher than ever, it is no wonder prospective students are flocking to sites that not only help them narrow their college search, but make them the best applicants they can be.

The United States' secondary education system has experienced tremendous change since the latter half of the twentieth century, leading to today's tumultuous and highly competitive college admissions process. Prior to the 1940s, only 20% of high school graduates attended college (NACAC, 2011). That college population consisted almost entirely of white males of a middle or upper-class socio-economic status who typically chose where to attend college based on location and cost (Lumina Foundation, 2004). College applications and decisions on where to attend typically weren't made until at least one year after high school graduation. The enactment of several bills and policy changes by the U.S. government, such as the G.I. Bill and emergence of federal aid programs in 1965, opened the doors for many more Americans to pursue post-secondary education. Additionally, students increasingly arrived from a variety of backgrounds. By 1970 nearly half of American high school graduates were accepted to college. Since the 1980s, more females than males have attended college. Furthermore, between 1995 and 2009, college attendance increased by 43%, which is largely regarded as a product of increasing societal pressures and belief that a college degree is means for a prosperous life. As of Fall 2014, 21 million American students were enrolled at an American university, with a student body that is regarded as the most diverse population history has seen.

In response to the country's expanding college student population, a variety of changes have been made to accommodate the growing number of students applying to, and choosing, a college to attend. Beginning in the 1950s, college choice and rankings became emphasized as colleges started working together to establish common admissions deadlines. The decision of where to attend college remained straight-forward and heavily influenced by location and cost. Literature regarding the admission process was predominantly directed at parents until the 1970s. As more students applied to colleges, admission criteria and selectivity tightened. The simultaneous addition of hundreds of more colleges across the U.S. led to competition between colleges regarding recruitment of the best students. The 1960s were also marked by the establishment of the College Board, National Association of College Admission Counselors, and the American College Test (ACT), all further evidence of the emerging organization and structural changes of the college admission process in the U.S.

As competition for students increased, universities developed greater marketing strategies to attract the most qualified students to apply or accept their offer of admission. Admission materials placed a growing emphasis on post-college outcomes beginning in the 1980s, and college rankings released by U.S. New and World report also became a cornerstone of college decisions beginning in 1983. By the 1990s, many higher education professionals began regarding the admissions process as a business, citing vigorous marketing techniques, a heavy emphasis on national college rankings, and constantly evolving admissions deadlines. According to a report from the Lumina Foundation, the average student yield per U.S. college is lower than ever before, because an average of 41% of a college's admitted students accept their offer of admission. With an average of

$585 spent on recruiting each prospective student, and $806 being spent recruiting admitted students, it is no wonder that colleges across the country are doing everything they can to increase student yield, while recruiting the best students to their university. Simultaneously, continually falling admissions rates across the country combined with an increasing number of high graduates has forced many prospective students to apply even earlier and to even more colleges than before to increase their changes of being accepted. In Fall 2010, 77% of prospective college students submitted three or more applications, while 25% submitted seven or more applications. This number continues to increase every year. Additionally, 75% of U.S. colleges reported an increase in the number of applications they received in the past decade. Rising college attendance, lower yield rates and increasingly difficult standards culminate to present students and their families with high pressure and uncertainty during the college admissions process.

      With the college admissions process more competitive than ever, it can be assumed that this already high-stakes process of choosing where to pursue a post-secondary education has been complicated by rising costs, tightened admissions standards, and increasingly strategic marketing strategies. As a result, prospective students and families face an increasing level of uncertainty as they navigate the admissions process. For many, a belief exists that choosing where to attend college will have profound impact on the rest of one's life. Therefore, students and families desire to combat any uncertainty or doubts about the decisions they need to make, and they can now do so online. As can be witnessed on any college website or online discussion forum, students and parents seek information regarding admissions standards, application assistance and university-specific information that may make applicants a better

candidate for admission. Furthermore, students often provide detailed information about his or her credentials and ask for the publics' opinion on whether or not they will be admitted given their credentials. This practice, often regarded as "Chance Me" on sites like College Confidential, provides students with less ambiguity and personalized guidance while they prepare to apply or wait for an admission decision.

According to Brashers and Hogan (2013), individuals are likely to manage uncertainty by first appraising the situation and develop anxiety around it, and then reduce uncertainty via information search and retrieval. While a variety of information retrieval processes exist for those wishing to manage uncertainty, the Internet has become one of the most popular locations to share information, and many types of it. Depending on how critical the circumstances or type of person searching for information, individuals may desire factual information, advice, general perceptions or personalized information to aid in the information retrieval process. In the context of the college search and selection process, factual information may equip searchers with admissions statistics, college rankings, or information stemming directly from a reliable college resource. In contrast, personal information may include beliefs about a particular college's academic environment or a personal experience of navigating the college admissions process. Advice may include information presented as recommendations, which includes advising a prospective student on where they should apply, or what to do to adjust as a new student. General perception information intends to provide insight in such a way that it describes societal attitudes toward a particular object, in this case a college. Each of these types of information work to alleviate uncertainty during the information retrieval process, but levels of uncertainty may drive the needs of particular types of information.

The college admissions process, for example, often unfolds over a several-month process, dependent on the practices of the student and his or her family. However, the types of information needed during the process may shift overtime, from basic facts to highly personalized information or advice. For example, a Junior in high school just beginning the college search process may ask for a general perception or facts about the best colleges to attend for Engineering, whereas a Senior just days away from the decision deadline may ask for very specific, personalized information about where is best to attend given his or her circumstances.

Increasingly, the Internet serves a variety of interpersonal functions, such as social maintenance, relationship building, and entertainment. It also serves an important function of information utility because it is a popular place for information retrieval. The sources people utilize to locate information may vary depending on need levels, and the individuals or entities who provide information also vary. In an environment like College Confidential's Talk Forum, users see posts and questions and assess their ability to provide the information being requested. In off-line environments individuals enjoy sharing information with one another, so it is no surprise that they also enjoy doing so online.

As described by Whiting & Williams' in 2010, uses and gratifications of the media can often be defined as either being for normative or informational purposes. Normative reasons include establishment of consumer conformity, which are influenced by internal consumer characteristics, whereas informational purposes are defined by consumer conformity influenced by external characteristics of the virtual community.

In the context of college admissions, a normative reason for visiting a site like College Confidential may be to share information about personal experiences at a college to contribute to the virtual community. An information purpose for visiting the site may be to observe how prospective students in similar situations prepare for college. Just as the types of information being sought online are driven by the individual's level of need for disclosure, the individual's purpose in seeking information may also be driven by their level of need. For example, a prospective student in the middle of his/her college search and selection process may visit a forum for the informational purpose of understanding what others in his or her situation are doing to manage uncertainty. Contrarily, a past college student or parent of a previous college student may share information for normative purposes; that is, adding to information already online to confirm or deny information based on prior experiences. Although many regard the usage of the Internet and its many online communities as new information resources, the widespread use of online forums has actually been long in the making, providing evidence of its long-standing utility.

Usenet, a precursor to the web, launched in the 1980's as the first section of the still-evolving Internet not utilized for research (Usenet, 2015). It is regarded as one of the oldest computer network communications systems still in use today, and it is often referred to as an early pre-cursor to the modern day Internet forums popularly used today. Usenet provided a space for users to read and post messages within chosen categories, resembling the structure of current online communities. Most notably, Usenet offered the first virtual location where users could post about any topic they desired. The conversations on Usenet and the framework it provided for future versions of it offered a

glimpse at the methods and reasons individuals share information online. Usenet was revolutionary as it gave way to some of the first informal online communication platforms heavily used today. Like Usenet, current online forums offer valuable insight into the communication practices between often anonymous or partially anonymous users who may be communicating with one another from across the globe.

The utility of the Internet as a communication technology used to connect individuals not only to other individuals, but to information, greatly affects our ability to access information; however, with this array of information evolving from a variety of sources, comes the responsibility of assuring it is valid. While previous research has been conducted to identify consumer trends in the use of product review forums, research has not identified the critical conversations happening on college review forums as prospective students navigate the admission process. The conversations trends and communication patterns occurring on these often unregulated online conversation threads have not been identified. This research intends to identify trends in information-seeking and retrieval practices on a popular online college review forum.

Research Question 1

What types of users most commonly utilize college review forums, and what types of posters are they likely to be (original posters or responders)?

Research Question 2

How able are responders to provide requested information based no the type and topic of information requested by original posters?

Research Question 3

How does the time of year (presumably a product of the admissions cycle) affect the types of discussions occurring online?

Research Question 4

How does user type affect the types of discussions occurring online?

Method

The study was performed as a content analysis of 48 conversation threads from College Confidential's Talk Forum. Although many college forum and review sites exist online, I chose to collect data solely from College Confidential because of its popularity and variety of topics. Recognizing the changing discussion types as a result of the evolving admissions cycle, I collected four threads from each month of the year spanning a 12-month period. Data were collected as a stratified quota sample and were selected based on the month the conversation was started and on the premise that the discussion was based on questions and answers of a traditional, four-year college experience in the United States. Discussions of transfer students, non-traditional, or international students were not considered for analysis. These were the only preliminary steps taken to collect data.

Access to College Confidential's Talk Forum is public, and any Internet user can view the posts and responses featured on the site. Therefore, no user login was needed to collect data. Although the user name of each post was utilized to infer the user type, usernames were not recorded and were essentially stripped from the data. I believe these methods pose no risk to the users of College Confidential. The research methods utilized to carry out this research were submitted and approved by the Institutional Review Board.

Once all 48 threads were selected, they were separated by line or sentence and coded for analysis. Lines were determined by punctuation, or where punctuation would be in cases that it was missing. A minimum of 25 lines of each thread was coded. In order to retrieve a large variety of posts while not collecting more data than needed for analysis, a natural stopping point was established after 25 lines of a thread had been posted to it. Once each line was numbered, it was coded for the variables outlined and defined below. An interrater reliability analysis using the Kappa statistic was performed to determine consistency among raters for 14.5% of the lines coded in this data set.

Variables

Post Type. This classification was used to categorize each sentence as belonging to either the original post or existing as a response. All original posts were initiated by a single user, and subsequent responses were from new and repeat users. Original posters who re-entered the conversation were also coded as responders. The interrater reliability for the raters was found to be Kappa= .987.

Sentence Type. This classification was used to categorize a sentence as either being a statement or a question. Analysis determined how many questions and statements were provided in each post, and how these numbers may correlate with user type. The interrater reliability for the raters was found to be Kappa= .834.

User Type. User type is defined here as the type of individual authoring the post or response. Based on self-disclosure, information provided in the post or response, or the username of the poster, I classified a user as being a prospective student, current or past college student, a parent, a professional, other, or an unspecified user. Definitions of each user type are provided below:

A *prospective student* included any user who identified as a high school student currently navigating the admissions process, whether they have just begun their search, have applied, have been accepted or denied, or have made a decision on where they will attend college. A *current or past college student* included any user who identified as a student currently pursuing a post-secondary education or who has already received their degree. A *parent* included any user who disclosed that they have a son or daughter who will attend, has attended or currently is attending college. A *professional* was defined as a user who identified as an admissions counselor, school counselor, or professional in any field. A user defined as *other* signifies a user who self-disclosed enough information to be classified, but did not belong in any previously defined category. *Unspecified* users are those who provided no information about who they may, and their username also provided no indication of their user type. The interrater reliability for the raters was found to be Kappa= .74.

Date. This classification was used to descriptively define the date, month and year the post and responses were submitted. As previously discussed, the month the post or response was submitted was critical in determining how the admissions cycle influenced the users' conversation topics. All twelve months of the year were represented in the data, and later condensed by four seasons: winter, spring, summer, and fall. Posts submitted between January and March were coded as winter months, April-June posts were coded as Spring postings. Posts submitted from July through September were coded as Summer posts, and October through December posts were coded as Fall postings. During analysis, month was cross-tabulated with topic type to determine how conversation topics fluctuated through the year.

Topic Type. An important variable coded for was topic type, which could be classified by one of the following: *Academic topics,* defined as discussion about a university's academic rankings, major-specific offerings, or specific information about students' study habits, course rigor, or professor reviews. *Admissions topics* were defined as any discussion about pre-enrollment, which included admissions statistics, an applicant's credentials, application deadlines, or decisions of where to attend college or what to major in. *Financial topics* were defined as any discussion of the financial aspects of attending college, including college debt, FAFSA, family income or college costs. *Athletic topics* included any conversation about sporting game attendance, player recruitment, or school spirit. *College life and settings* included questions or answers about campus culture, residence halls, social life, or information regarding the campus location and weather. Finally, *other topics* were defined as conversation about any topic not included in the categories already described. The interrater reliability for the raters was found to be Kappa= .68.

Credential Disclosure. A frequency of total number of credential disclosures was tracked to determine the total number of credential disclosures users made in each post. A credential disclosure included statements about one's academic accomplishments as they may have pertained to the admissions process. For example, a student who disclosed high school GPA, class rank, or test scores would be defined as disclosing credentials. The following sentence would be coded for having three disclosures in it:

"I am a senior with a 3.98 GPA, graduating in the top five of my class and I got a 30 on the ACT."

The interrater reliability for the raters of credential disclosure was found to be Kappa= .96

Well Wishes. Statements that included any sort of general well wish to the audience were coded as containing a well wish. This includes statements such as "good luck, class of 2015!" or "You can do it!" The interrater reliability for the raters was found to be Kappa= 1.0.

Topic Agreement. This variable described the degree to which the responder provided information relevant to the topic or topics presented by the original poster. After comparing how both the original poster and responder's statements were coded by topic, an additional code designated whether or not the responder remained on topic. For example, if an original poster asked questions about financial aid, and the responder provided information only on the topic of college life and settings, the responder's post would be coded as not being in agreement. Topic agreements coded as being on topic must have first been presented by the original poster and never by subsequent responders. Furthermore, it should be noted that if the original poster re-entered the conversation and presented a new topic for discussion, subsequent conversations about that topic would also qualify as being in agreement. The interrater reliability for the raters was found to be Kappa =.81

Type Agreement. This variable described the degree to which the responder provides information relevant to the information type requested by the original poster. Original posters may request a variety of information types in their posts. This could include requests for factual information, personal stories and beliefs, advice, or general perceptions. The degree by which a responder provided information relevant to the

information type requested is determined by first identifying the type of information the original poster requested and comparing that to the type of information provided by the responder. For example, if the original poster asked for a personal account from students who received financial aid, and a responder provided a statistic about the percentage of students receiving financial aid, the responder's post would be coded as not being in agreement with the original poster. The interrater reliability for the raters was found to be Kappa= .83.

Analysis. Once each line was coded for the variables outlined above, an SPSS analysis was performed. Although the unit of analysis was the line, several analyses were conducted treating each post or response as the unit of analysis, in order to prevent lengthy posts from misrepresenting data.

Results

Post Type. A total of 1,374 lines of data were coded from the 48 conversation threads collected from College Confidential. 491 of the analyzed lines came from original posters, whereas 838 of the coded lines originated from responses to original posts. Additional information about the descriptive results of the data is included below.

Sentence Type. A total of 1,173 of the coded sentences were categorized as sentences, whereas 201 total sentences were coded as questions.

User type. Of all original posters and responders included in the data set, 28.6% were identified as prospective students, 33.2% were identified as current or past college students, 13.9% were identified as parents, .4% (a total of one user) were coded as professionals and 53.3% were coded as unspecified users.
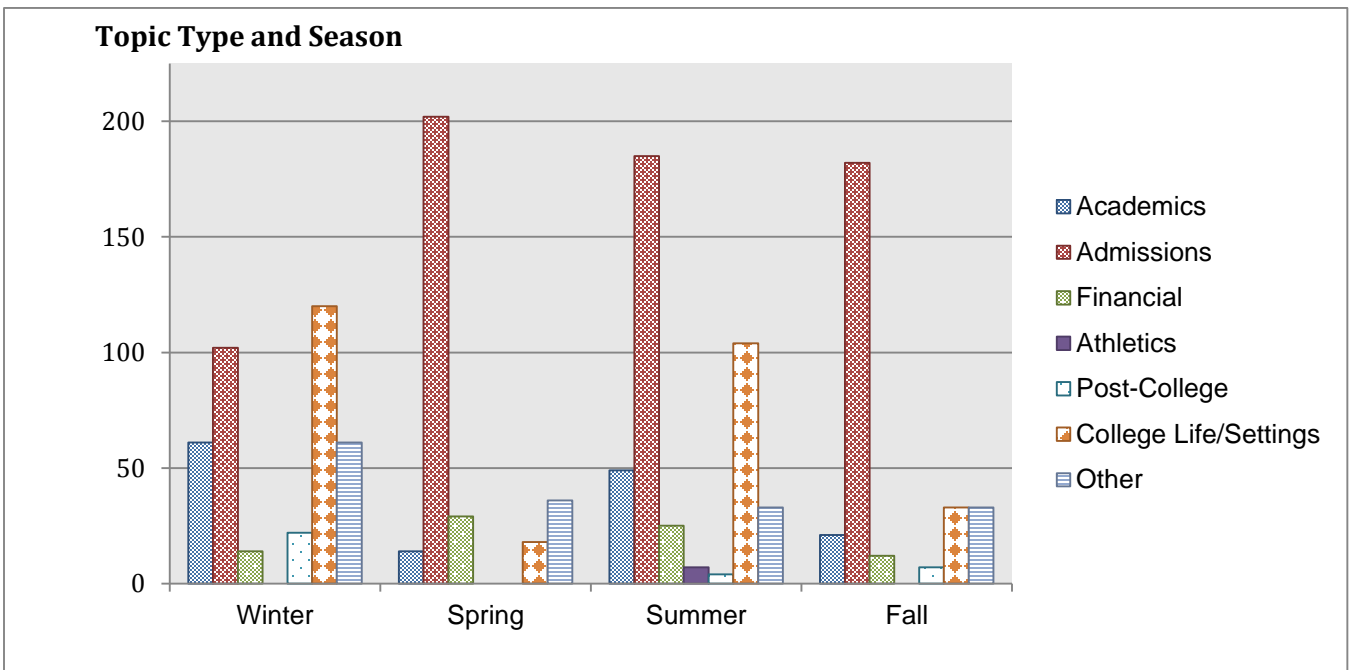
Topic Type. Total frequency of topic type by line results' are featured in the figure below.

Figure 1.1
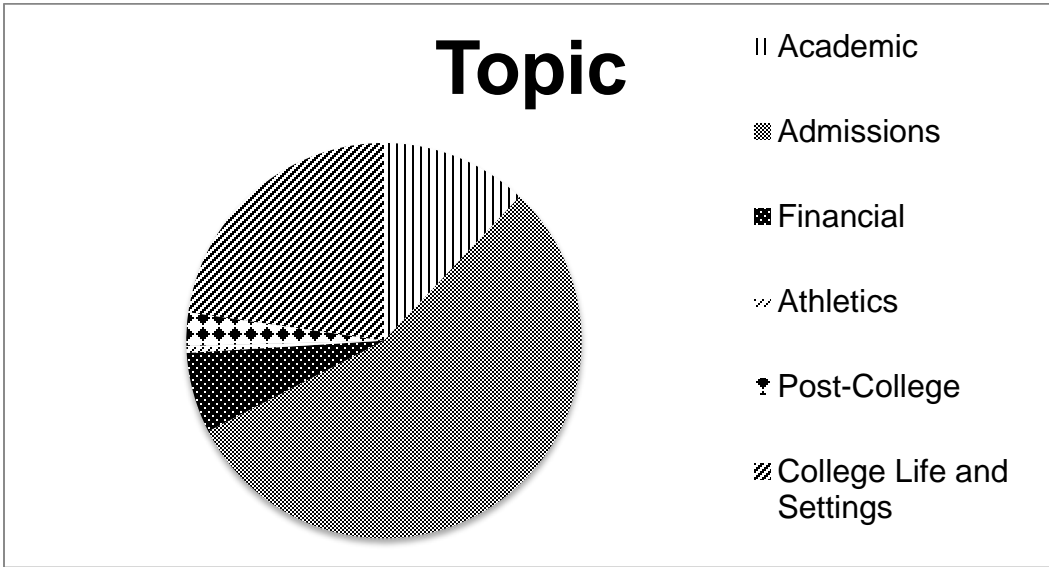
Date and Topic. A cross-tabulated analysis identified trends between the time of year and its effect on topic discussion. The results are displayed in the graph below.

Figure 1.2

User and sentence type. A cross-tabulated analysis of all lines in the data set identified trends in user and sentence type. Of all sentences coded as *statements*, 36.6% were written by prospective students, 3.0% were from current or past college students, 19.4% were from parents, 1.7% were from professionals, and 39.3% were from unspecified users. Of all sentences coded as *questions*, 54.7% were from prospective students, 0% were from current or past college students, 14.9% were from parents, 0% were from professionals and 30.3% were from unspecified users.

User and post type. A cross-tabulated analysis of user and post type identified trends between user type as it related to the user types that started the threads (as original posters) and who tended to respond. Results are displayed in the charts below.
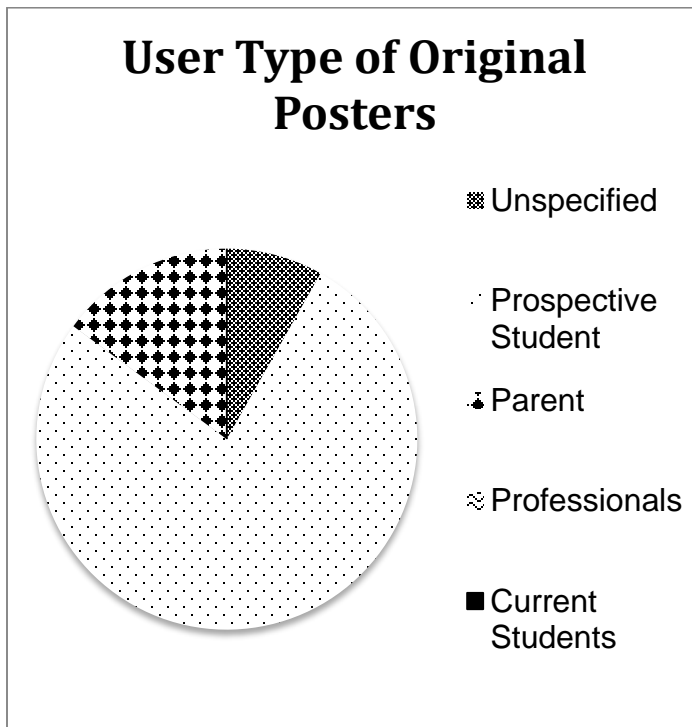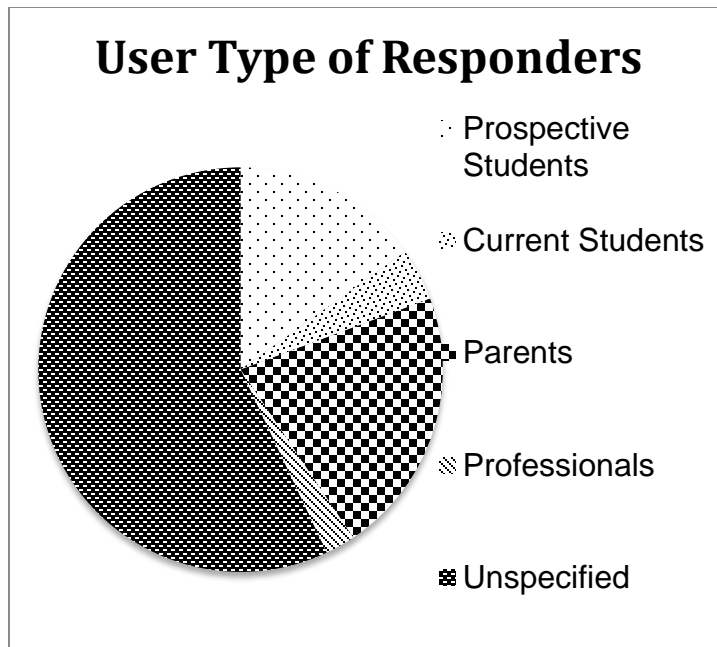
Figure 1.3

Figure 1.4

User Type of Responders

Prospective
Students

Current Students

Parents

Professionals

Unspecified

Credential disclosure. On average, users who were coded as disclosing credential information in her or her post disclosed credentials about 2.95 topics. All but one user who disclosed credential information was coded as a prospective student.

Well wishes. A total of 32 of the total analyzed lines were coded as containing a well wish. This equated to a total of 2.3% of all lines.

Topic agreement. Responders provided information that aligned with the topics presented by the original poster 93.7% of the time.

Type agreement. Responders provided information that aligned with the information type requested by the original poster 96.5% of the time.

Discussion

Based on the descriptive results outlined above, a variety of conclusions can be made about the interactions taking place on online review forums like College Confidential. A critical finding of the study is the disparity between user types as they

vary by post type. Although specific codes and guidelines were used to classify user types, 53.3% of users were coded as unspecified users. Had these users provided any sort of identification about themselves, they would have been coded accordingly or as "other" if no other code had been appropriate. However, this statistic sheds light on the fact that over half of users in the sample provided no information or clues as to who they may be or why they were qualified to provide information. Without any information about who the user may be, viewers and other posters on the site have no method of holding the poster accountable, nor do they have a reason to trust his or her credibility.

Even more alarmingly, observations also made during analysis found that users do utilize the information they are provided online to make informed decisions about where and how to apply to college. During analysis, I witnessed several instances of students returning to a forum they had initiated to thank the posters for their assistance, because it helped them make their final decision. Based on time stamps of the posts and responses, I also observed several prospective students make decisions minutes after posting their questions and receiving answers from a handful of users. These instances reinforce the idea that forums like these are a powerful place for conversation and important decisions to be made, yet many of the individuals providing information do not provide a reason for site users to trust them.

A cross-tabulated analysis identified trends in the types of users initiating posts (presumably asking questions) and replying to them (presumably providing information). The results showed a stark difference in the type of users who typically ask questions and the users who respond. As displayed in the chart above, 76.9% of original posters were coded as prospective students, and 57.0% of respondents were coded as unspecified

users. Although no formal conclusions can be made as to who the 57% of unspecified responders may be, given the level of expertise they seemed to display on specific admissions questions or university-specific topics, it seems reasonable to assume many unspecified users are actually admissions professionals or current/past college students who have experience in admissions. No evidence exists to support these assumptions, however.

Another finding for discussion is the high level of agreement respondents were able to answer original posts with. As the data above show, 93.7% of the time, respondents remained on the topic originally discussed by the poster. Additionally, 96.5% of the time respondents responded with the information type originally requested by the poster. In the high-stakes context of college decision-making, these results are promising for any user who may wonder about the applicability of the information presented online. It is arguable that most visitors access the site in hopes of finding or asking for information that pertains to them in the admission process. Because of this, they may already be pre-disposed to providing information online. Given the high-stakes and often highly pressurized discussions occurring on the site, it is no surprise that responders are willing to provide pertinent information to reduce others' level of uncertainty. While the true motive for responding cannot be accounted for in this study, it can be supposed that assisting one user may be part of the reciprocating courtesy that often results on College Confidential. For example, many original posters ask for others to evaluate his or her criteria and determine which schools they may be eligible for admittance to. However, they do so while offering to also "chance" any responders back. Other times, responders may provide information to the original poster but not before also asking him or her for

assistance on a topic related or unrelated to theirs. Although it is highly respectable that users are ready and willing to assist practical strangers in an online setting such as College Confidential, it may not be entirely out of goodwill, but also in hopes of receiving help themselves.

Although not coded for, personal observation during the coding process led me to conclude that in cases that the respondent presented a new topic for conversation, it tended to be a user who had been coded as a parent with a topic type having been coded as financial. I speculate that this is an accurate reflection of the real world conversations many prospective parents and students are already having, and also reflects the idea that financial aspects of the college process are most important to parents, while academic rankings, college life, and athletics are most discussed by prospective students.

Finally, as was valued in the coding process, topic type results found several phenomena in the popularity of specific topic types. First, I found that nearly half (48.8%) of posts were coded as admissions-related. I concluded that College Confidential is indeed, doing what it intends to, as it provides a popular space for user to ask and answer admissions-related questions. Secondly, a cross-tabulation of topic type and date identified several trends in the changing admissions conversations occurring online. I wanted to observe possible changes in topic discussion type and its relation to the time of year the conversation takes place. Although topics of admissions were consistently popular throughout the year, shifts in discussion on both college life and settings and academic topics shifted throughout the year. Both topics were generally left un-discussed during the Spring and Fall months, but were much more likely to be discussed in the Winter and Summer.

Although no formal reasoning exists to describe this phenomenon, I propose that topics of academic and college life are popularly discussed when decisions deadlines approach. For this reason, I propose that these topics are most discussed during the winter because high school students are preparing for the latter half of the admissions process or have received early decisions from their prospective colleges. Discussions about college life and settings may also be popular in the fall because decided students have specific questions pertaining to housing, packing, and roommates as they prepare to attend college.

Study Limitations

Although this study was carefully designed to account for a variety of factors that may offset data results, study limitations still presented several issues during the data collection process. First, the algorithmic design of College Confidential created significant issues collecting data from all twelve months of the year. Whereas 250 pages of threads exists on each forum topic, the site is set up so that only the most recently replied to threads are accessible for users. I confirmed this organization of the site with College Confidential site managers, who assured me that no other method of data collection would be possible to perform. For this reason, the majority of posts viewable to site visitors are those created just hours or days ago, hindering data collection speeds because of the lack of variability of the posts available on the site.

A second potential study limitation pertained to the individuals taking advantage of the resources and assistance found on College Confidential. One Stop College Consultant, Laurie Weingarten, believes the types of student credentials featured on the site may be skewed due to the types of students utilizing the site. "College Confidential is

the most popular, and its usage skews toward the highest achieving students. If you spend time on that sight, you will notice a disproportionate number of applicants who rank at the top of the country" (Weingarten, 2014). This idea brings into question the types of discussions surrounding college choice and selection criteria's as it reflects on the rest of the country's college admissions conversations. However, this potential study limitation does no harm to my analysis of the interactions occurring between users online, which demonstrate individual's needs and ability to provide information regardless of an applicant's academic or personal circumstances.

Conclusion

Utilizing the Internet as a source of powerful information is often viewed as not only the most efficient and simplest form of information retrieval available today, but also a trusted location to seek advice and consumer-generated knowledge. The high-stakes decision process surrounding the U.S. college admissions process has driven many prospective students and families to perform as much research and preparedness as possible to navigate the admissions process. While users like those on College Confidential are led to believe they are asking and receiving information in an environment of individuals in similar circumstances, much of the information users share originates from completely unknown sources. This phenomenon, although studied on a college admissions forum, reflects on the anonymous power of the World Wide Web, its role in society's consumption patterns, and the role communication technologies play in our lives for reducing uncertainty. Understanding the interpersonal interactions and meaning-making derived from these conversations is critical in understanding the impact online information has on its audience now and in years to come.

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