"Hook the Parents and We Will Have the Students…"

From Home to Dorm: Collegiate Marketing to Students and their Mediated Parents


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By

Jessi Excell-Allen


Thesis Committee:

Jonathan Holiman, MA, Chair

Approval Page

We certify that we have read and viewed this project and that, in our opinion, it is satisfactory in

scope and quality as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Professional Communication.

Capstone Committee

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Jonathan Holiman, chair

## Abstract

Campuses are dealing with the emergence of a new demographic for their marketing efforts. Young adults today are coming from homes of often helicopter-type parents. With the advent of social media and technology, parents are still hovering but now they are doing it via mediated venues. This type of parenting is called mediated parenting. It is having a serious impact on how colleges are recruiting and retaining this group of incoming freshmen. Because most parents are utilizing mediated communication, campuses are responding with marketing and retention efforts via mediated channels. This paper explores how one southwest regional university is succeeding in marketing efforts to this new demographic.

**Acknowledgments**

Well, to be honest, I wasn't sure this day would come. I can't believe I am actually typing an "acknowledgements" page on my Master's Capstone Project. It has been quite a journey getting to this point and, as with many journeys, there were many people along my path to help, guide and mold me into something better. My dad always told me, "No education is a waste!" It was his example of teaching and love of learning that solidified my listing of "Get my Masters" onto my personal bucket list. Thanks, Dad. I love you to bits!

Getting into the Master's program truly started with the urging and counseling of Art Challis and Sage Platt. Both of these professors were part of my undergraduate studies at SUU and continued to be inspirational in my Master's classes. I am so thankful "Smart" Art saw something in me and extended the opportunity for me to be an adjunct professor and in doing so, enroll in the Master's of Professional Communication program.

All of the faculty in the program nurtured and encouraged my interest in family communication and particularly my drive for the research in parent/child communication. I would be remiss, though, if I didn't give a special shout out to Jonathan (my chair) and Stephanie Holiman. Having taken a mediated communication course from Jonathan, my interest in how families were using social media to connect and even parent was fueled. This new passion continued to grow as I did a study abroad with the Holimans in Tonga during my master's program. I was so thankful to be able to take my entire family with me. It was an unforgettable adventure. My capstone project took root on the rickety old buses we used to go from village to village on the Tongan islands, drinking from coconuts and chatting with Jonathan and Stephanie about their own young adult sons and evaluating how I'm communicating with my growing children. I was inspired to research how helicopter parenting had evolved with the development

of mediated communication. This Tongan adventure is a priceless memory for my family and I feel blessed to have had the Holimans encouraging my curiosities, but mostly I feel so thankful for the experience my family had in the Polynesian culture.

Of course, the most important inspiration was my own family. My parents, sisters, nieces, nephews but most of all, my incredible husband and my three amazing children. They all sacrificed so that I could accomplish this goal and they never let me give up. I hope my kids will always remember how important education is, and that it isn't just about sitting in a classroom and taking notes. Education involves meeting wonderful people, sharing ideas and having adventures that make you a better person. To my kids and my best friend and husband, Lex; thank you a million times over for sticking with me through this and for being my favorite inspiration. I love you guys to infinity and beyond!

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**Introduction**

From the Addams Family to the Cleavers to the current hit sitcom "Modern Family," time and culture have shown us what a 'typical family' might look like. We have watched family dynamics play out in television series, in politics, and in tragedies and triumphs in headline news stories. There has been particular interest in the parenting styles—the successes and failures—of parents in all aspects of life. Many individuals blame or credit parents for the decisions they make, the situations they find themselves in and for the way they choose to parent their own children. Parenting styles vary greatly from family to family, but one thing remains constant— the pattern of communication in the family is intriguing if not fascinating to study.

Parents are constantly seeking ways to better connect with their children, particularly their teenage/young adult children. Living in a world where communication has gone almost completely digital, it is to be expected that family communication, and parent-child communication more specifically, is evolving with technology as well. However, communication is not the only aspect of parenting that has been changing over the last few decades. The phenomenon of helicopter parenting or over involved parenting has become a highly discussed matter in most circles of family psychology (Odenweller, 2014).

This paper investigates how parents continue to helicopter their children even after they have left home to begin life as an independent adult, and how this continuation of parenting effects college campuses. College campuses have historically been viewed as a place for emerging independence, self-discovery and thresholds of opportunity. These ideas about university-life have changed over the past few years. Children with helicopter parents are taking their time finding their independence (Odenweller, 2014). Once these children leave home, the helicopter parenting evolves into a different but still micro-management type parenting style.

Parents continue to monitor and manage their children with the help of technology. Parents use mediated communication outlets to keep a close watch on their children. They use everything from social media posts to apps that actually monitor their child's location while away from home. This form of mediated parenting, much like helicopter parenting, has an impact on the systems of university life. From the beginning phases of marketing and recruitment to the process of enrolling and retaining students, universities are having to adapt to this new form of parenting and the students it is creating. These "over-parented" young adults need a more hands on approach when it comes to embracing college life. The parents of these students also need to be considered in the recruitment and retention process. This research paper connects the aspect of mediated parenting and the efforts of universities to recruit and retain college students.

## Literature Review

When it comes to parenting and parent/child communication, there is truly a vast array of research, resources and opinions to fill the library shelves. The sector this paper will focus on is that of mediated communication in parent/child relationships and how this dynamic affects higher education, particularly how universities are using mediating communication to reach and communicate with the demographic of helicopter parents. This style of parenting has emerged from a reference in a book by Haim Ginott (1969). He used the term to describe parents that are hovering over their children like a helicopter. It became popular enough to actually be a dictionary entry in 2011. The concept of helicopter parenting is relatively new in terms of parental research. But it definitely has roots in some of the more dated parenting studies.

**Parental Styles**

One such study would be the research of Diane Baumrind (1966).  Her early research in

in the area of parenting strategies developed three accepted forms of parenting styles:

Authoritarian, Permissive and Authoritative.   These styles cover a broad range of

communicating and disciplining within the parent/child dynamic (Baumrind, 1966). The

permissive approach has little to no expectation or control over a child.  For example, permissive

parents do not set curfews; they believe in a child's right to come and go freely.  In that same

vein, permissive parents are opposed to guiding their children's decisions or opinions in any

way.  On the opposite end of the spectrum is the authoritarian style parent.  These parents keep a

very tight grip over a child and his or her behavior and decisions.  Authoritarian parents are

extremely strict disciplinarians and they leave no ground for discussion or variance of opinion.

Most children reared in this dynamic either rebel from over controlling parents or follow

precisely in their parents' paths, opinions and perspectives (Baumrind, 1966).  The middle

ground would be the authoritative approach.  In this manner, a parent presents a set of standards

and discusses with the child the reasoning behind these ideas.  Discussion is encouraged, but

there is still a level of parental guidance issued and enforced.  This is often cited as the most

effective form of parenting (Brenner &Fox, 1999). Children are encouraged to make their own

decisions but can rely on the guidance and experience of their parents (Baumrind, 1966).  There

is still a wide difference in this style and permissive parenting.  Authoritative parents retain a

level of control and while discussion is encouraged it is understood that parents have the final

say in discipline and their opinions count when decisions are made (Baumrind, 1966).  While

this research is quite dated, it is still a banner study in the field of psychology and parental

communication.

**Helicopter Parenting**

The idea of over-parenting (Ginnott, 1969) has continued to emerged but has taken new shape with the advent of technology and accessibility (Petronio, 1994). Helicopter parenting lends itself to a more authoritarian aspect in its control measures but has a bit of a hybrid appearance with permissiveness when it comes nurturing.  This style is overly involved but it is also overly protective (Odenweller, 2014).  Many researchers are delving into the question, "Where does this over-involved parenting come from?" A research article titled, *Helping or Hovering? The Effects of Helicopter Parenting on College Students' Well-Being* (Schriffin et al, 2014), shows that parents in the last decade are much more conditioned to worry about their children and the difficulties they will face in their lives.  It credits moments as early as "in-utero" testing detecting birth defects that contribute to this sense of anxiety parents now feel about the trials their children will need to overcome (Schriffin et al, 2014). There is little research showing the long term effects of helicopter parenting, however, we now see many of these millennials entering adulthood armored with this style of parental relationship history.  While past parenting books have praised "parental involvement and attachment" as healthy and beneficial (Baumrind, 1966) they may not have taken into the account the long term effects of being overly involved and overly attached (Schriffin et al, 2014).

While helicopter parenting appears to be a gesture of love and concern, there is research showing many problems emerging with the children raised in such a way.  These issues range from school yard and classroom problems being left unresolved and building, as well as, young adults entering the workforce and the college campus without the ability to cope on their own (Fingerman, et al, 2012).  Many universities are struggling to combat the difficulties this generation of students is facing. In one study entitled, *Investigating Helicopter Parenting,*

*Family Environments, and Relational Outcomes for Millennials,* written by Odenweller, Booth-

Butterfield, and Weber (2014); shows "overburdened college campuses" and "millennials'

stunted development" (p.2) into adulthood.

This study showed a correlation between excessive involvement from parents (helicopter

parenting) and adult children who were not comfortable making adult decisions, having group

discussions, or taking charge of problem-solving situations. This data was consistent with the

researchers' hypotheses (Odenweller et al, 2014) that children with helicopter parents grow up in

an environment where they are never exposed to or given opportunities to struggle in an intense

decision making situation, be part of a large family discussion and/or decision about important

matters of family direction. Thus, without exposure to such situations, they are left empty when

it comes to experience in the independent life category and will consequently struggle physically,

financially and emotionally while transitioning and adjusting to adulthood.

In addition, based on the current study, we can infer that Twenge's discovery, that

Millennial's possess a quitter mentality is a function of the helplessness children of

helicopter parents feel because they are unaccustomed to failures associated with

common, adult experiences (Odenweller et al., 2014 p. 13).

This is the most commonly accepted research on overprotective parenting, but through

reviewing several studies, there are also an abundance of articles (Gregory, 2015) with more

positive results regarding the parenting style in question.

**Helicopter Parenting in Higher Education**

Such studies include articles with backing from university staff that feel helicopter

parenting, while more complicated in its nature, is also helping ease the intimidation of the

"independence" transition. These articles also applaud and encourage the overprotective actions

when parents are helping teens choose campuses for which to apply (Gregory, 2015).  Gregory

(2015) suggests actions such as; reviewing crime rates not only on the actual campus, but the

surrounding communities; background checks on potential roommates and providing very heavy

support for emotional transitions; have all been seen as positive efforts to keep young adults safe.

Benefits have been noted not only in physical safety but emotional and mental well-being

(Gregory, 2015).

In a research article written on a college campus in Minnesota, titled, "Why Colleges

Need Helicopter Parenting," (Gregory, 2015) illustrates this contradictory point of intrusive

parents versus supportive families with this quote; "Yes, parents can be intrusive," says Marjorie

Savage, a researcher in the University of Minnesota's department of Family Social Science who

studies college parenting, "but at the same time, there are increasing examples of parents

refusing to step up when students genuinely need their family." (p. 5) However, even in

Gregory's (2015) discussion about the positive effects of helicopter parenting, data from the

research clearly shows millennials being unprepared to handle adult independence and most

signs are pointing to the overprotected childhood fostered by a helicopter parent (2015).

On a campus in the southwestern region of the United States, a study was conducted by

the Student Affairs Office to research retention rates and student satisfaction.  According to the

university's Vice President of Academic Records, this study found there are five main reasons

why a student decides to stop his/her educational pursuits.  They include: Financial issues,

mental/personal health reasons, employment, life changes, and the campus not meeting their

expectations (Kirby & Allred, 2016). To elaborate, specific reasons listed were: Living away

from their support base (parents, childhood friends) was too much of a burden, living in a rural

community, academic preparation, or some combination of all of the above not meeting their

college expectations. This could definitely be a factor of helicopter parenting. Based on the

information provided in this study, it appears students who do not understand or have the skills

to succeed without their parents' involvement are not able stay enrolled and therefore affect

retention rates at this university.

This university's Student Affairs Offices and the ACES (Student academic

advisors/mentors) have developed a program that will hopefully help students feel more secure

while away from home.  This is a program designed to encourage adult leaders around the

students to report signs of mental, physical, emotional or financial struggle to the Student Affairs

Office.  The student will then be given resources and support to overcome these struggles

(personal communication, 2017).  This is an effort to help students establish independence and

move into a less-parented phase.

While there is definitely a handful of positive notions coming from helicopter parenting of

university students (including but not limited to physical safety, financial help, emotional support

etc.); it is also evident that this group is coming up short when it comes to the ability to find and

flourish with independence in early adulthood (Fingerman et. al, 2013) (Kirby & Allred, 2016).

Youth from the ages of 18-25 seem to be having a hard time carving out personal space and

recognizing the need (or being forbidden the chance to establish) independence and strong

decision making abilities (Hawk et al, 2008).

This "college age" demographic is the focus of the study presented in this paper.

Narrowing the helicoptering phenomenon to one particular aspect of communication, the

research regarding social media and parenting became more relevant. As previously stated in the

introduction of this paper, there is a perception of over involvement from the perspective of a

young adult toward their parents because of the accessibility social media is providing.  In a

recent study, a comparison of modern day parenting juxtaposed to Baumrind's styles in 1966, found conclusive results that while the three styles still held a great deal of validity in the field, these styles appear to be very subjective in context with much convergence and overlap (Brenner and Fox, 1999). This could be pointing to the rise of new communication outlets to propel parenting strategies.  For example, it is worth noting that the emergence of more prominent media access has had an impact on parental communication and the messages received.  Parents that strive for more control in the family dynamic tend to have children that are more susceptible to television/media messaging (Fujioka & Weintraub-Austin, 2002).

**Parenting and Social Media**

This arena also takes into account the higher access parents have with opportunities to send messages via mediated communication.  Communication in the digital age is much faster and easier.  Teens are reporting higher instances of communication with parents (particularly mothers) and these messages are received with both negative and positive results in parent-child connectivity (Rudi, Dworkin, Walker, Doty, 2015) (Olivas, Jones, 2011).

Taking a closer look at digital messaging, research is showing a high degree of resistance and frustration from children who feel their parents are over-involved (Siibak, 2009).  As these children begin emerging into adulthood, the messages and images posted/sent are having ramifications on emotional health, budding independence and personal ambition (Siibak, 2009). While it is known and recognized that there is a commonality to parent-child tension when the child enters adult years, there is not much research as to the source of this tension. There is strong evidence that relationships between parent and child affect the message and therefore effect continued communication into adulthood.  Over-involved parenting shows lasting effects even into the ages of 22-49-year olds (Fingerman et al, 2009).

Petronio (1994) conducted a study about teens and their need for privacy as they begin

seeking independence.  While this study still has solid bearing, the rise of social media has

extended and tweaked Petronio's original findings (Ledbetter et al, 2010).  Further research by

Petronio (2010) in subsequent years showed continued need for children to begin establishing a

level of privacy,

> …as children reach a point where they are considered independent, they may begin to
>
> form an individual set of criteria or rules for privacy regulation over information that is
>
> considered personally private. These rules may differ from family privacy orientations....
>
> The other family members may see this divergence from a general orientation to private
>
> information as a challenge. (p. 165)

In the research completed by Petronio (2010), those "family members" discussed are

parents.  It has been suggested more recently, that parents should be cautious when

communicating with their children (particularly college age/emerging adults) via social media

(Ledbetter et al, 2010).  This demographic is in need of boundaries and parents issuing privacy

may also be facilitating promotion of independence (Ledbetter et al, 2010).

Because there are various forms of social media, it seems to be important for parents to

choose appropriate outlets to use for communication purposes with their children. Although not

an academic based study, the results of an internet poll conducted by London (2013) are

interesting to consider:

> Family chats are becoming a thing of the past as the majority of parents now
>
> communicate regularly with their children through social network sites, according to a
>
> new report out today.  A staggering seven in ten parents have admitted to now using
>
> social sites such as Facebook and Twitter as a regular channel of communication in their

family. And more than one in ten admit they didn't have meaningful chats in person with

their children at all throughout a typical week. (London, 2013 p. 1)

Parents using social media are finding various ways to stay in touch, including

commenting on posts, viewing photos online, texting, messaging and tagging children.  There is

evidence that this practice (or at least the over-use thereof) is not healthy and actually

problematic for both parent and child (Rudi et al, 2014).  Children, particularly in the emerging

adult phase, need to be given space (Odenweller et al, 2014).  Parents need to be able to detach

themselves and their feelings of control and guilt from the decisions these young adults are

making (Odenweller et al, 2014).

As we know from research on impression management, it is very important for

individuals to maintain a specific identity and profile on social media (Siibak, 2009).  It is

particularly imperative for college age adults to discover an often new identity as they experience

new things, form new views and gain unique perspectives in the college phase. They need a

certain amount of freedom and privacy to do this (Dworkin, Connel, & Doty, 2013).

**Systems Theory in Organizational Communication**

The aforementioned research on helicopter parenting sheds a great deal of light on the

problems society is facing as these children who have been "helicoptered" are reaching various

phases of adulthood (college, work force etc.) (Odenweller, 2014), but it also gives a nod to

some benefits this style of parenting has afforded (Rudi et al, 2015).  Due to the impact social

media has on parenting and the generation of children that have been considered "over-parented"

(Rudi, Walkner, Dworkin, 2015), universities are having to unite their internal forces to reach

this new audience and recruit and retain new students (Connors & Caple, 2005).

In 1966, Katz and Kahn, formed a theory involving how systems function together and separately.  This theory was originally applied to social psychology, but Katz and Kahn saw the opportunity to use systems theory in organizational communication.  Currently there are branches of the theory explaining open systems (allowing themselves to be affected and influenced by their environment, customers, and culture) and closed systems (running free from the influence of impending factors).  Universities would fall under the branch of open systems as they are constantly changing and adapting to the trends of society (Gregory, 2015).

Katz and Kahn (1966) set up the framework for systems theory using four main elements. The elements are as follows:  1) energic inputs 2) transformation process 3) energic outputs and 4) recycling.  Energic inputs can be defined as the variables of the system that keep the organization functioning, such as; employees, departments, etc.  The transformation process includes how the inputs interact with each other and produce products, reach goals or take actions.  The third element is the energic outputs or the products themselves, the messages sent or the ideas produced.  Lastly is recycling, or how the outputs are brought back into the organization.  In business, recycling would include revenues off sold products being put to use in other aspects of the system (Connors & Caple, 2005).  On a campus setting the recycling is more fluid.  Students registering for the university are a result of the outputs while their tuition and retention grants are recycled back into the system to continue the process.

When using this theory in the realm of higher education, it is possible to see how universities adapt to their clientele and more importantly how the departments within the system must become interdependent to send clear and impactful messaging.  Systems rely on this unity to produce the results to which they aspire.  "Systems thinking holds that system elements are

interdependent and that systems at all levels are interdependent on each other" (Connors &

Caple, 2005 p. 7).

Recognizing the important role that social media plays in the communicative relationship

between college students and their parents, this study will investigate how campuses are utilizing

social media and other forms of mediated communication to reach their target audience. This

study will also elaborate on the notion that the target audience for university marketing is

changing with the over involvement of parents.

This paper will explore how a university in the southwestern region of the United States

has worked toward interdependence within their organizational system to reach the demographic

of helicopter parenting, focusing particularly on the use of mediated communication.  It will also

investigate how these efforts are translating to recruitment and retention at this particular

university and researching the effectiveness of the system's framework.  The focus group will

examine the energic inputs (university employees in the recruitment/retention departments), the

transformation of the inputs, the energic outputs (marketing and retention efforts) and finally

how these outputs are recycled back into the system and help the growth of the institution.

**Research Question 1**—What are the perceived feelings of helicopter parenting on recruitment

and retention in higher education?

**Research Question 2**—What are the strategies of mediated communication used by higher

education to reach the demographic of helicopter parents?

**Method**

This study was conducted by administering three focus groups regarding mediated communication and a separate analysis of parental posts on social media. The first focus group was comprised of college students or young adults, the second of parents raising young adults and lastly, a group of professionals in the departments of recruitment, retention and marketing on the campus of a southwestern regional university. Focus groups were the best and most effective way to gain the data in a timely manner and allow for open discussion about parenting college students and how campuses communicate with these parents.  It was explained that all discussion would be kept anonymous, and all parties signed consent to participate.  All participants were aware that the discussion was being recorded and was later transcribed into text, which will be discussed further in the Data Collection and Analysis section.

For the parent and child focus groups, snowball sampling method was used along with convenience sampling due to the fact it was focused on two specific audiences. During the focus group, participants were asked a series of questions and were encouraged to talk as a group about their experiences with their parents or children and communicating through social media. The professional focus group was asked to discuss their experiences with helicopter parents in higher education and later how they use mediated communication to reach this demographic.

**Participants**

The first focus group was comprised of students from *Introduction to Communication* classes and those who are a part of the Assistant Coach for Excellence and Success organization, or ACES. This program is defined as a student-based organization who peer mentor first-year students. Because the students, who are also ACES, have experience overseeing a certain number of students, including help with registration, social activities, academics, and any other questions

or concerns the students have (including a large responsibility with the retention portion of the university system) were invited to attend, and bring friends along with them. The majority of the student focus group were freshmen and sophomores, with a few juniors and seniors. A couple of the student participants were Residential Assistants or RAs (a student peer who supervises those living in a residence hall or group), some were involved with the student government organization, and a few were international students. There were 28 participants in the student focus group, and it was conducted on campus.

There were eight participants in the parent focus group and they were collected by convenience sampling. The focus group was conducted in a home, off-campus, to be more conducive to conversation. The eight participants were all mothers, ranging in age from 35-48. Each of the mothers was parenting young adults. The questions for the mothers group were along the same lines and topics as the student based focus group but tailored to their specific situation. The focus group was not heavily structured. It focused more on discussions, engaging in a conversation regarding parenting highlights, trials and dealing with young adults emerging into independence through mediated communication.

The professional focus group consisted of 8 participants. The emphasis was on the departments of recruitment, retention and marketing. In an attempt to apply systems theory and see how these internal departments were utilizing interdependence to create a united message for their audiences (Connors & Caple, 2005) while still focusing in the constraints of mediated communication, individuals were selected that held positions in each of the following areas: Student Affairs, Admissions, Parent Services and Marketing. The breakdown for university employees in the professional focus group is as follows:

Assistant Vice-President for Student Affairs

Coordinator of Completion and Student Success

Parent and Family Services Coordinator

Assistant Director of Admissions and Recruitment

Assistant Director of Marketing Communication

Digital Content Coordinator of Marketing

ACES (student advisor, peer mentor) Retention Services

This group was asked questions regarding how higher education has adapted to the rise of heavily involved parents and how they have changed their marketing strategies to accommodate this shift.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The focus groups were unstructured with open-ended questions so that more information was received. The discussions lasted about 30-45 minutes. The participants could answer with lengthier answers or keep them brief. The questions asked for information such as; what some of the benefits were in communicating with their parents or children through social media, or some of the frustrations. It then moved on to more specific questions regarding helicopter parenting and asked how communication between parents and child took place through social media, and whether or not they felt they were being helicoptered or were helicopters. In the professional group, there was discussion about experiencing extreme over-parenting in their department when working with parents and their students. It was also discussed how these parents manifested their involvement in decisions and how this helicoptering affected recruitment and retention. The discussion then moved to how utilizing mediated communication was a great medium to reach this demographic because they are so actively using it to communicate with their college-age children already.

The data was evaluated through the Constant Comparative Model. This method is used for data that is compared to previous data that has already been researched (Glaser, 1965). The parenting through social media (comments, posts and pictures) content was compared with the styles of parenting Baumrind proposed in her original study. The comments made by young adults were compared to the comments made by parents—how they perceived messages differently and how they attempted to communicate specific feelings, ideas and emotions.  When the modern parents and their feedback was compared to the styles of permissive, authoritative and authoritarian approaches, the emergence of a strong helicopter parenting style employing the perspective of mediated communication appeared. The information collected was evaluated and categorized. It was then used to determine the relationship between the variable and the other possibilities to find the perceived effects of communication that would or would not affect parental strategies.

The data from the professional group was used to categorize the strategies of the university in using mediated communication to reach these specific types of parents.  This focus group showed how this specific university is, or strives to be, a very open system that adapts readily to the factors influencing their efforts.  The discussion lead to an understanding of how interdependence enables a university campus to send united messages in the form of marketing, support, or reaffirming.  These messages will be further discussed in the results section.

## Results and Discussion

The collection of data from all three groups was, overall, very supportive of a few compatible similarities.  From the parent and the college student group, the evidence supporting helicopter parenting was quite overwhelming, but without a doubt an emergence of sort of hybrid form of parenting began to manifest itself.  This new style, parenting through mediated

communication, combined with the involvement of helicopter parenting, may surmise a new

addition to Baumrind's original parenting forms (1966).  For the purposes of this paper, this

hybrid strategy of parenting will be termed, "Mediated Parenting", meaning helicopter parenting

with the ease and convenience of mediated communication including, but not limited to, social

media, texts, emails, blogs and skype.

Several verbal examples were given during both the parent and student group supporting

this parental strategy.  In the area of micro-managing or as previously discussed, "helicoptering"

via social media, one student said, "When I first came to college my mom had a really hard time

giving me my space and allowing me to grow. She always wanted to know what I was doing or

who I was with."  Another mentioned his parents made him get a summer job because they saw,

through his social media accounts, that he had been partying too much. Still another student

revealed that, "My mom tried to ground me while I was here at college. She found out (via

Instagram) I was staying out too late and told me I needed to stay in my dorm and I had to text

her when I got home." Other students said things like, "I never want to post certain things on

Facebook, like a date I went on or something, because I know my mom will comment and ask

questions about who he is, or what we were doing."

From the parents' perspective I heard things like, "I love that social media allows me to

keep track of my kids.  I get to see where they spend their weekends and who they are hanging

out with." Parents are definitely utilizing social media to help them manage their young adult

children.  No parent in the focus group seemed to have an issue with this concept.  In fact, one

mom said, "We are so lucky to have access to their posts.  I can't even imagine how scary that

would've been for our parents to just sit and wonder who all these people were that we were

hanging out with and where we were going.  I love getting to see pictures and posts of my son's

life." Another mom added to this, "So true. I knew my son's girlfriend long before we met in

person, because I followed all their posts on Instagram and I asked questions and made

comments so we could be forming a relationship."

It is important to include this emerging form of parenting because it supported so

thoroughly the results that came from the professional focus group. It also helps establish the

basis for whole-heartedly needing to adopt the open systems theory (Katz & Kahn, 1966)

approach at the university level. We can see through the professional focus group that the

energic inputs would include the departments of marketing, recruitment and retention. The

transformation process for this university is extremely interwoven and interdependent as each

facet relies on the other to accomplish the goal, or in systems theory terms, the energic output of

getting students to register for this particular university. The employees all recognized that, in

fact, the target audience for recruitment has changed with the development of helicopter

parenting through social media (mediated parenting) and this environmental influence was

implemented into the transformation process of the system. Through this process, the

departments utilized various strategies of mediated communication to achieve the energic

outputs.

The system cannot reach its target audience if it is not willing to adapt to the

environmental influences affecting it. Those influences include students, of course, but as

highlighted in the professional focus group, they now include parents on a much greater level

than ever before. Universities need to modify their efforts to accommodate this new form of

parent, who is now, also a new target audience. This new form of parenting being the mediated

parent.

Interdependence within the system is crucial to achieving recruitment and retention goals. Thus, interdependence between the energic inputs and throughout the transformation process is an apparent strength of this university system.  It can also be noted, and will later be elaborated on, that this university has had great success in the recycling of their outputs.  Evidenced by utilizing the high numbers of entering freshman and high percentages of retained students, the university recycles this achievement back into the system and builds on future recruitment and retention plans.  One of the elements to assist in this effort is that the campus implements effective strategies of social media to continue the process leading the school to solid outputs and prosperous recycling.

The discussion in the professional focus group seemed to revolve around three major areas of recruitment, retention and marketing.  These were the departments highlighted (energic inputs) within the system that were observed most during the discussion.  It was established very quickly that higher education is aware of the changing dynamic in students applying for college. These students have been parented in such a way that emerging independence is a more distant goal for college-life.  The Vice-President of Student Affairs stated,

> We recognize that these students are not coming in as freshmen prepared to become adults and begin their metamorphosis into independence.  We have now pushed that off as a goal into sophomore or even junior year.  This first year, we know is going to be a three-way relationship between us, the student and the parent.  With the parent being our main point of contact. Our goal for the first year is helping both parents and students get comfortable and feel safe and secure in their relationship with (our university). This is our best approach to retention. (March, 2018)

The realization of this changing dynamic is crucial to their transformation process. Without this knowledge, campuses will continue to market and target their students in the same fashion as they have decades before, resulting in a failure to reach students. This specific campus has embraced the hurdle of delayed independence development and created avenues to work with the parents in a cooperative way to encourage emerging adulthood.

With that in mind, each of the departments play an important role in the process of contacting the target audience. The Assistant Director of Recruitment and Admissions said, "We know that if we get the parents, then we have the kid. But it starts with recruiting the parents. It hasn't always been like this in higher education, our target audience has shifted" (March, 2018). This particular university has a process in which they continue to adapt and modify each year during the recruitment season. It starts with marketing and recruitment is then moved to marketing and support and hopefully finishes with affirmation and strong retention. Because technology is such a major part of our culture and business world, much of this marketing and support happens via mediated communication.

When the discussion of the professional focus group shifted to how helicopter parenting was affecting higher education and the idea of working with mediated parenting styles, it was an easy transition. The marketing team opened up about social media campaigns and how these are, like many other businesses, their first form of advertising. Communicating with parents via social media emerged as an easy and convenient method of marketing for this institution. But social media wasn't the only platform the marketing team was using. Throughout the discussion, a list of several mediated venues emerged as being used for the purposes of recruitment, retention and marketing. These tactics were narrowed into the following 5 mediated strategies: Social Media, Email, Blog Posts, Apps, and E-News Letters.

**Social Media**

As previously discussed in the literature review, social media has become such a huge part of our culture that there is no hesitation in recognizing it as the first and strongest method of advertising and marketing for most businesses.  The university in this study falls into this category as well.  Each branch of the university system being analyzed, seemed to have a firm grasp on their responsibilities regarding social media; the posts, comments, likes and shares.   In fact, all of the three areas represented in the focus group (recruitment, retention and marketing) have a professional staff member that is designated for handling and managing social media within their department.  Of course, the marketing team for the university, also has a social media presence (multiple personnel) covering this area of communication.

With the overwhelming response from the college student focus group and the parent focus group regarding how often they use social media to maintain contact with each other, it proved to be a popular discussion piece in all three groups.  One parent commented, "She (daughter) is so far away that I feel like I have to surround myself in her Insta feed just to feel close to her now" (October, 2017).

The university recognizes this function of mediated parenting and is covering all the social media outlets in response to it.  One university official stated,

Facebook is definitely more of a "parent venue" now.  We use Instagram and Twitter to reach students, but I have to be honest, I know moms are checking Instagram too.  So, when we post marketing spots we try to remember where the parents are most likely to see it. (March, 2018)

Dealing with demands of highly involved parents has become such an important issue on campus, that the university has created a professional position in the Student Affairs Office

called Parent and Family Services Coordinator.  This position was developed to communicate

with parents and meet the demands of the helicopter style.  The parent coordinator is in constant

communication with parents regarding questions, concerns, support and information

dissemination.  She works with both admissions on the recruiting end (energic) and student

affairs on the retention end (recycling).  The coordinator uses social media in her communication

with parents in this fashion,

> One of the ways I get information out about campus happenings and ideas for parents to
>
> help support their students is by tagging posts on social media.  I love to tag great articles
>
> for parents like, 'How to support your new college student' or 'Dorm decorating 101'.
>
> I'm always tagging campus events that I feel parents would like to know about like,
>
> 'Nominate a student to be a Thunder U team leader'.  Parents love to nominate their kids
>
> for things like that.  Or 'Career Fair', 'Deadline to drop classes' or 'Registration dates'
>
> are all the kinds of things I will tag parents on so they can easily follow what's happening
>
> down here. (March, 2018)

The two student ACES that participated in the professional focus group talked about how

as mentors they try to follow and friend all of their students (they are assigned a block of

students to oversee throughout the year).  "It just helps us to be able to check in on their Insta

feed every now and then and make sure they are posting happy things.  It's also good for our

relationship, because I try to comment on their posts occasionally so they know I'm still around

and they can reach me easily when they need me" (March, 2018).  Comments like these highlight

how social media helps the university system in marketing and retention as they post messages to

capture attention but also how they utilize the speed and accessibility of social media to maintain

relationships with parents and students, thus fortifying retention strategies.

**Email**

The development of this strategy is especially important in the admissions portion of the system.  When recruiting students most of the communication is done via email.  The components of the system work interdependently to keep information flowing between the university, the parent and the student.  "When I hear from parents, it is always first through an email.  I've often times replied suggesting that the student stop by my office to address these concerns or asked that the student respond to me rather than communicating through the parent, but usually I just end up getting a phone call when they don't get what they want through the email," says retention administration (March, 2018).  The process of getting a student from 'interested' in SUU to enrolling at registration is one that is dripping with mediated communication efforts.

> Once we get a student that is interested," begins the Assistant Director of Recruitment and Admissions, we send their email address immediately to marketing so they can start adding them to their email lists.  From there, marketing takes them to the point of ready to register and their email address is sent to the Student Affairs office so they can be assigned an ACE and begin the process of retaining that student after they enroll. (March, 2018)

It seems email is the means for lengthier communication pieces.  An enrollment officer noted that, "Although we do include students on email lists, for sure, the email response from students is little to none.  If students respond directly (which is rare) it is usually via text or IM (instant messenger)."  While email does seem a more antiquated means of communication, it is still a strong format for information dispersal.  Admissions sends all applications and registration information through email.  "One nice thing about email is that you can tag a message to know

when they (the receiver) opened it, so you know important documents and applications are

getting through," stated the Assistant Marketing Director (March, 2018).  Email does however,

remain a solid strategy for reaching out to mediated parents.

**Blog Posts**

On this university's website, there is a link to read and follow the school's blog.  This

strategy is a place where parents, students or anyone else can read posts regarding the

university's achievements, upcoming events, or reminiscings.  The Parent Coordinator stated,

> The blog has been a great spot for me to post write ups for parents about popular
>
> concerns or frequently asked questions.  And if I see a different department put up a blog
>
> post that I think is relevant to parents, I will always send a link to the blog post parents
>
> via Facebook. (March, 2018)

Other departments at the university are frequently asked by website administrators to post

articles on the blog.  For example, the Community Relations Department has asked the

university's National Alumni Council members to post spotlights of alumni on the blog.  These

spotlights are an attempt to reconnect alumni to the university but also to highlight some of

strengths and achievements of alumni in an effort to recruit and retain new students, and of

course, appeal to the discretion of their parents.

"One of the most effective marketing tools we have is the creation and production of

short video messages about the university," says the Assistant Marketing Director.  "These

videos get posted to social media spots but we also put links to these messages on the website

and more specifically the blog" (March, 2018).  The video messages provide an interesting break

from text on the blog, they are also used to show some of the achievements of our students and

alumni.  In the "(university) to Everywhere" campaign, the videos are used to show students

traveling the world, starting businesses across the country or even performing on world

renowned stages such as Broadway, The Tony Awards or a local favorite, The Shakespeare

Festival.  Utilizing a different communicative strategy, that being video, the campus is reaching

new groups.  Today's society is highly visual with short attention spans and high-resolution

footage can send a myriad of messages that written words on a blog cannot quite express.  The

videos, therefore, are highly strategic. The university blog provides another solid avenue of

mediated communication to reach these parents that are conditioned to receive information on-

line.

**E-News Letters**

This particular mediated strategy is handled mostly by the parent coordinator in the

Parent and Family Services department.  The department regularly sends monthly newsletters to

parents of students at their university.  These newsletters include brief updates around the

campus and upcoming dates to remember or save, important deadlines and due dates.  The

newsletter appears to be more of a public relations piece, a gesture of support and comradery

between the institution and parents of enrolled students.  There are brief inspiring messages and

often pictures of things that have been happening on campus.  The e-newsletter is sent via email

to parents but it is also posted on the website each month.  Although the parent coordinator is the

person that creates and publishes the newsletter, all departments are permitted to contribute and

are asked for dates or information they would like added from their department.  "It's more light-

hearted, with short, simple blips about life at our university.  The parents seem to really respond

to it.  I guess the more we connect with them, the more comfortable they feel with us having

their kids here," she explains (March, 2018).  Once again this illustrates the need to communicate

with this demographic of mediated parent and to have an easy and continuous connection.

**Apps**

This particular university has done a great job of keeping up with business and marketing trends. Technology evolves so quickly that it takes a full-time staff of people to keep up with this task. A team of marketers, IT staff members and students, came together to take the challenge of keeping technology on their side. They created a specific university app. This project is still in its infancy stages, but students and families have downloaded and are using the app currently.

As the tongue in cheek saying goes…. "There's an app for that!" Reminding us that someone has come up with an application to put on our phone or tablet to help us make life easier, more organized or more accurate. The app fills these same qualifications. It is centered mostly on student need and was in fact created to be used mostly by students, but as these three focus groups have shown, parents and college students (particularly in the freshman and sophomore years) cannot easily be separated when it comes to brand marketing or client-need-communication strategies. So, many parents are downloading the app as well. They are able to track the happenings of the university and keep a thumb on campus life. One parent said, "(Our university) makes it easy to keep a close eye on my kids while they're away. I even downloaded the (university) app just so I could encourage my son to participate in events and get involved" (October, 2017).

As per the interdependence of this system, each department encourages students and parents alike to download the university's app through their mediated communication with them. "I know it's mostly for students, but I have encouraged parents to download it too. It's just another way for them to connect to our campus and feel like they are closer to their child," offers the parent coordinator (March, 2018). Even though the app is new to this campus, it is seeing a

good following for its early phase.  Other universities have had great success with campus apps

also.

## Conclusion

Observing these focus groups with systems theory in mind, it is easy to conclude that

universities must strive to be open systems that embrace the environmental changes, trends and

influences that inevitably impact them and their growth. The inputs must work together to create

the appropriate transformation process and attain the desired outputs, so the recycling of these

outputs increases their success.  In the case of college campuses, this success is recruitment and

retention. The university in this study has done an exceptional job meeting these influences head

on and embracing the shifting dynamic of parenting styles, students' needs and the demands of

maintaining a reputable university campus.

Throughout the discussion of the professional focus group, the emphasis on the

interdependence of the system was very evident.  It seems that one department could not fulfill

its obligations without the help of the next.  The system was interdependent almost to the point

of fluidity, meaning the tasks moved from one department to the next with overlap, support and

back up coming from all sources of the system.  The parents of students are not necessarily

pawned off to one particular department, as it may seem upon hearing of the creation of the

position for Parent and Family Services Coordinator.  Each department communicates with the

parents of students to meet the needs of helicopter/mediated parents. The recycling of the outputs

results in not only positive numbers in the retention area, but also a positive atmosphere on

campus. Because the system is so interdependent, the communicative messages are coordinated

and present a united image for a solid public relations campaign.  This campaign then results in

outstanding numbers and statistics for the university.

From an admission stand point, this institution has increased enrollment by 20 percent in the last three years.  "More importantly than strictly the increasing numbers of enrolled students, though, is the *type* of students we are getting.  We give a ton of credit to marketing for that.  (Our university) is getting the *right* students to fit our campus," says the Assistant Director of Recruitment and Admissions (March, 2017).  The marketing team has made special efforts to target particular students that might be a good fit for this campus and they are doing this targeting through social media.

> The images we use are mostly of students having clean, wholesome fun.  We aren't a
>
> party school, we leave that to (other institutions).  We try and post images and
>
> particularly photos that highlight our surrounding landscape. After winning the title of the
>
> "Most Outdoorsy Campus" and earning the nickname, "The University of the Parks",
>
> (our university) definitely hopes to draw on a particularly hard working, outdoor loving,
>
> high standard student.  We aim for that in our social media outreach and it's working.
>
> Getting the right student means keeping the students,

explains the Assistant Marketing Director (March, 2018).  And working it is—retention rates on this particular campus have gone up 7 percent in the last 2 years.  They are currently boasting an institution high of retaining 71 percent of their student body.

> Another aspect of retention and recruiting that isn't always mentioned because it's not as
>
> easily measured by numbers, is the fact that attendance at events has increased.  And
>
> even more interesting, the atmosphere at events is positive with a higher energy level
>
> than we've seen in previous years,

says the Coordinator for Completion and Student Success.  "Students are getting involved and are happy here, that translates into solid retention rates" (March, 2018).  As per discussion in all

of the focus groups, the mediated communication sent by the university is encouraging students

and their parents to get excited about events, clubs and organizations on campus.  Having these

messages so accessible is helping parents to push their children to get out of their dorm rooms

and enjoy campus life.

Helicopter parenting and the rise of mediated communication, supports the case for use of

the term, mediated parenting. It is without question impacting many aspects of our society and

universities.  Higher education must embrace systems theory and utilize an open system to adapt

to the changes that students of helicopter parents bring with them.  Altering the marketing and

communication efforts to accommodate as many forms of mediated communication as possible

is a strong step in the right direction.

Helicopter parents will continue to hover, but once their children leave the nest for

college, this physical hovering has to take a new shape and that shape is mediated parenting.

Parents will continue to be extremely involved; emotionally hovering, guiding and advising their

children, but they do it now through mediated communication because physical distance is easily

overcome with the various technological outlets.  Universities willing to adjust their systems to

meet the needs of not only helicopter parents but now mediated parents, as this southwestern

university has done, will find the most success in recruitment and retention.

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