Like & Subscribe: How Your Digital Footprint Affects College Admissions[1]

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Abstract

This study investigated the evolving role of social media in college admissions, focusing on the perceptions and practices of admissions professionals in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court's 2023 decision on affirmative action. Utilizing a descriptive statistics design, the research employed a survey administered to a convenience sample of 532 admissions representatives. The findings directly challenge the public and media narrative by revealing a paradox: while social media monitoring is not a widespread practice, its impact on admissions outcomes for a notable portion of applicants is significant. The study found a vast majority of respondents believe evaluating applicants based on social media could lead to bias (87%), and a large proportion of institutions have no formal policy governing the practice (78%). These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of how admissions professionals navigate this contentious issue, demonstrating a significant disconnect between perceived media influence and actual practice. The findings inform future educational initiatives for both students and institutions, advocating for clearer guidelines and increased transparency in the admissions process.

Keywords: *Higher education; social media; college admissions; holistic review; bias*

Introduction

The whispers and warnings about colleges spying on students' social media have reached a fever pitch, but a new study reveals the truth: your mom was wrong. The landscape of college admissions has historically been a meticulous, multi-faceted evaluation of a prospective student's academic performance, extracurricular achievements, personal essays, and letters of recommendation. It is a process that seeks to define a student's potential contribution to a campus community, often framed within the context of a holistic review. In recent years, a new and powerful element has entered this evaluation: the digital footprint. As social media has become an inseparable part of modern life for students, it has also become a source of information—and potential scrutiny—for admissions officers. This phenomenon has been extensively chronicled by media outlets, often with a sensationalized and alarmist tone. Headlines regularly warn high school students to clean up their

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online profiles, citing surveys that claim a significant percentage of admissions officers are actively monitoring social media (Ascione, 2024; CS Staff, 2024; Leckrone, 2024; Rim, 2024; Schaffer, 2024; Tagle, 2025; The Social Institute, 2025).

This media narrative, however, has been built on a foundation of studies with limited scope and often contradictory findings. The most widely cited of these is an annual survey by Kaplan Test Prep, a global leader in educational services and admissions research since 1938, that has consistently reported that a growing percentage of admissions officers check applicants' social media profiles (Schaffer, 2024). In 2024, Kaplan reported that 28% of admissions officers were engaging in this practice, a figure that has climbed from 17% in 2009 (Ganim Barnes & Mattson, 2009). This figure has become a de facto statistic in the public discourse, contributing to a perception that social media monitoring is a pervasive and influential practice that can make or break an applicant's chances. However, the validity and implications of this narrative have not been rigorously examined through large-scale, independent research. The sensationalism of media reports has created a significant gap between the perceived ubiquity of social media monitoring and the reality on the ground in admissions offices.

The purpose of the study is twofold: first, to determine the actual prevalence of social media monitoring and its perceived impact on admissions outcomes; and second, to explore the ethical and policy-related perceptions of admissions professionals, particularly in the context of the Supreme Court's 2023 ruling. This study aims to directly challenge and contextualize this narrative by answering the following research questions:

1. How does social media monitoring influence decision-making and outcomes in college admissions?
2. What are the perceptions of college admissions officers regarding the use of social media as a tool?
3. What are the ethical implications associated with social media monitoring in admissions decisions?
4. How can educating high school students and their parents about responsible Internet practices help them navigate the potential impact of social media on college admissions?

By leveraging a comprehensive, independent survey of 532 admissions professionals, this research reveals a profound paradox: while social media monitoring is not a widespread practice, its impact on admissions outcomes for a notable portion of applicants is undeniable. This tension between low prevalence and high impact is particularly critical in the current, post-affirmative action environment. Following the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* (2023), which prohibited the use of race as a factor in admissions decisions, institutions are tasked with finding new, legally compliant ways to evaluate an applicant's potential to contribute to a diverse campus (Hlavac & Fegely, 2023). Consequently, while this study confirms the practice remains rare, the ruling has sparked speculation that social media—which may reveal a student's unique background, experiences, and perspectives—could become an increasingly important tool for assessing what constitutes a "holistic fit." The insights from this study thus serve as a crucial resource for navigating the complexities of modern college admissions during this period of institutional transition.

Literature Review

The integration of social media into the college admissions process is a contemporary issue that balances technology, education, and social ethics. The academic literature and media discourse surrounding this topic can be broadly categorized into three main themes: the perceived prevalence of social media monitoring, the ethical and legal concerns it raises, and the shifting context of holistic review in a post-affirmative action era.

The Perceived Prevalence: A Media-Driven Narrative

Since the late 2000s, surveys from various organizations have been the primary source of information on the prevalence of social media monitoring. Most notable among these is Kaplan Test Prep, an organization founded in 1938 by Stanley Kaplan to democratize higher education. Over the last eight decades, Kaplan has evolved into a global educational powerhouse, providing a comprehensive ecosystem of services including standardized test preparation for the SAT and ACT, as well as personalized admissions consulting. Because of its foundational role in the industry and its extensive scope of longitudinal research, Kaplan's annual surveys of admissions officers have become the benchmark for tracking digital trends in the field (Felton, 2015; Schaffer, 2017; Schaffer 2024). These surveys, often cited by major news outlets, have framed the use of social media as a rapidly growing and influential trend. For example, a 2017 Kaplan survey reported that 35% of admissions officers visited applicants' social media pages, a statistic that was widely cited (Associated Press, 2017; Egen, 2017; Schaffer, 2017; Williams, 2017). This number has since fluctuated but has consistently been high enough to fuel public anxiety and media headlines. A particularly influential Kaplan survey in 2024, which polled 205 admissions officers, reported that 28% of admissions officers were engaging in this practice (Schaffer, 2024). This figure has become a de facto statistic in the public discourse, contributing to a perception that social media monitoring is a pervasive and influential practice that can make or break an applicant's chances (Ascione, 2024; CS Staff, 2024; Leckrone, 2024; Rim, 2024; Schaffer, 2024; Tagle, 2025; The Social Institute, 2025).

A critical examination of these surveys reveals limitations. The methodologies are often proprietary, and the sample sizes, while statistically sound for a quick snapshot, may not fully capture the diversity and complexity of the nearly 4,000 degree-granting institutions in the United States. The surveys often rely on self-reported data, which may be influenced by an admissions officer's perception of what they are supposed to be doing versus what they actually do. This study provides a much-needed, independent data set to either confirm or, as the data suggests, contradict this widely held belief. The core argument here is that the high percentages reported by surveys like Kaplan's may reflect a public relations strategy more than a widespread professional practice, a hypothesis that this research will rigorously test.

Ethical and Legal Concerns: Navigating a Minefield

The practice of social media monitoring in admissions is fraught with ethical and legal complexities. The first major concern is applicant privacy. While most social media platforms have public-facing content, there is an implicit social contract that this content is not for institutional review. As Kilgore (2017) argues, the lines between public and private are blurred on these platforms, and an admissions officer's review of a student's public profile may still be seen as an

invasion of privacy. The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979) established the Belmont Report, a foundational text in research ethics that emphasizes respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. While not directly applicable to admissions, these principles provide a crucial framework for evaluating the ethical implications of reviewing an applicant's personal life without their explicit consent.

This ethical ambiguity is best exemplified by the significant disconnect found in Kaplan's (2024) research. While a record 67% of admissions officers now believe that reviewing an applicant's social media is 'fair game'—a jump from 57% just five years prior—only 28% report actually engaging in the practice (Schaffer, 2018; Schaffer, 2024). This 39-point gap between philosophical acceptance and behavioral execution suggests that while the industry has largely reached a consensus on the legitimacy of social media as a tool, there remains a deep-seated hesitation regarding its application. This study argues that this hesitation is rooted in the 'ethical minefield' described by many professionals: the fear that without formal institutional policies, the act of checking a profile—though deemed 'fair' in theory—inevitably invites the very implicit biases that the holistic review process is designed to mitigate (Barnes et al., 2015; Goodyear, 2017).

This leads to the second major concern of the potential for implicit and explicit bias. A student's social media profile may contain information about their race, religion, political beliefs, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status, none of which are explicitly required or appropriate for evaluation in the admissions process. The data from this study will show that a significant majority of admissions professionals are aware of this bias, yet a large proportion of institutions lack formal policies to prevent it. This highlights a critical institutional failure to provide the necessary ethical guardrails for a practice that, if left unchecked, could disproportionately harm marginalized or underrepresented applicants. A study by Allison (2019) established that admissions officers do form spontaneous trait inferences from social media; our research builds on this by finding that these same inferences can and do translate into significant, real-world consequences for applicants.

The Post-Affirmative Action Context: A Search for New Diversity Metrics

The 2023 Supreme Court decision on affirmative action has added a new, urgent layer to the debate on social media in admissions. The ruling effectively ended the consideration of race and ethnicity as factors in college admissions, prompting institutions to find new methods for evaluating an applicant's potential to contribute to campus diversity. The court's opinion, written by Chief Justice John Roberts, stated that while race cannot be a "plus factor" in admissions, a student can still discuss how race has affected their life through an essay or other materials (Howe, 2023).

In this vacuum, some commentators have speculated that social media could become a new tool for assessing diversity. An admissions officer might look at a student's public profile to gain insight into their socioeconomic background, unique experiences, or political beliefs, all of which could contribute to a broader definition of diversity. This is a legally perilous path. As legal scholars have pointed out, using social media as a proxy for race could be seen as a run around the court's ruling and could expose an institution to legal challenges (Roberts, Reuter, & Chan, 2023).

This legal shift has coincided with a broader government focus on social media screening for national security. The current administration has mandated that all student visa applicants make their social media profiles public for review by federal agencies, arguing the practice is essential for national security and public safety (Campbell, 2025; Wong, 2025). From one perspective, the minimal use of social media in college admissions, despite these federal directives for student

visas, suggests a profound divergence in priorities. This highlights the assertion that the government's approach may be overly broad or inefficient for assessing academic fit, a concern substantiated by the study's finding that admissions officers see the practice as an ethical minefield ripe for implicit bias. Conversely, one could argue that colleges, by largely ignoring applicants' digital footprints, are failing to adopt a valuable screening tool that federal agencies consider essential for national security, thereby overlooking a critical aspect of character and conduct that could impact campus safety and community.

This study will provide empirical evidence on whether admissions professionals believe social media is a viable or even necessary tool in this new landscape, directly testing this hypothesis. The data from our survey will show that admissions officers are overwhelmingly hesitant to use social media in this way, which is a crucial finding for understanding the post-affirmative action admissions landscape.

Theoretical Framework

Research indicates that both online and offline prosocial behaviors significantly influence identity formation during adolescence (Erreygers et al., 2018; Hardy et al., 2010; Iwasa et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2022; Pancer et al., 2007). Engaging in offline activities that demonstrate social responsibility helps adolescents explore and commit to their identities, leading to a more developed sense of self (Hardy et al., 2010; Pancer et al., 2007). However, early adolescents may struggle to use online interactions effectively for identity development; early online prosocial behavior can sometimes correlate with antisocial behavior, indicating difficulties with responsibility and societal goals (Erreygers et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2022). This suggests that online prosocial behavior during early adolescence may lead to ruminative and proactive exploration, impacting identity development (Iwasa et al., 2023). This research aims to illuminate college admissions practices involving social media monitoring to better guide high school students' online and offline prosocial behaviors, which shape their identity development. Several theoretical frameworks informed this study.

Constructivism, developed by Piaget and Vygotsky in the early-twentieth century, asserts that knowledge is built through social interactions, highlighting how admissions officers interpret applicants' social media presences and how biases shape these interpretations (Fosnot, 2005). This perspective also encourages reflection on ethical considerations related to privacy and fairness in admissions practices. Critical Theory focuses on power dynamics and social justice, enabling a critique of admissions practices that may reinforce inequalities tied to bias and privilege in the evaluation of online identities. Jürgen Habermas's 1962 German-language book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, was republished in English in 1991 and explores the public sphere and the role of communication in shaping democratic discourse, which is relevant in understanding how social media serves as a platform for identity construction and public engagement among students and admissions officers (Habermas, 1991). This framework uncovers the ethical implications of social media use in admissions processes and its effects on marginalized groups.

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) suggests that behavior is driven by intentions shaped by attitudes, perceived norms, and control (Ajzen, 1991). This framework explores how admissions officers' beliefs about social media influence their monitoring practices and intentions. Social Learning Theory, developed by Albert Bandura, emphasizes learning through observation and imitation, relevant for examining how admissions officers learn about applicants through social media (Bandura & Walters, 1977). Self-Presentation Theory, articulated by Erving Goffman

in 1956, explains how individuals manage their self-image through curated online profiles, making it relevant for investigating how applicants present themselves on social media to align with admissions expectations (Goffman, 1959; Merunková & Josef, 2019).

Lastly, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), proposed by Fred Davis in his 1985 doctoral thesis, addresses how perceived ease of use, and usefulness, affect the adoption of new technology (Davis & Granić, 2024). In this context, it provides insight into how admissions officers view social media as a tool for evaluating applicants and the factors influencing their willingness to adopt such practices. Collectively, these frameworks informed the research and enhanced our understanding of the interplay between social media, identity development, and college admissions.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design using descriptive and inferential statistics to evaluate the practices and perceptions of college admissions professionals regarding social media monitoring in undergraduate admissions. The rationale for this design is its ability to quantify and summarize a specific phenomenon, providing a clear and objective overview of the current landscape. A descriptive design was chosen to avoid making causal claims and instead focus on providing a foundational, data-driven account of the "what is" of social media in admissions. The findings serve as a baseline for future research and inform best practices. The research was designed to answer four key questions:

1. How does social media monitoring influence decision-making and outcomes in college admissions?
2. What are the perceptions of college admissions officers regarding the use of social media as a tool?
3. What are the ethical implications associated with social media monitoring in admissions decisions?
4. How can educating high school students and their parents about responsible Internet practices help them navigate the potential impact of social media on college admissions?

These 4 questions were combined into an Ethical Risk Index, tested with Cronbach's Alpha ($\alpha = .730$), and proved to be a reliable measure. Building upon the established framework, where the independent variable is the use of social media monitoring and the dependent variable covers admissions decisions and institutional perceptions, the following section details the specific sampling strategy and data collection procedures necessary to gather evidence and test these variables.

Sample and Data Collection

The study was conducted via an anonymous, voluntary survey administered through SurveyMonkey to a convenience sample of 532 admissions professionals between June-September 2025, a 160% increase from the 2024 Kaplan survey. This sample was drawn from the public professional email addresses of National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) members to ensure representation from a wide variety of four-year accredited colleges and universities across the United States.

Instrumentation

The survey instrument was a 31-question survey designed by the researcher to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. It was structured in five distinct sections:

1. Demographics: Questions on the type of college or university affiliated with, which yielded a mix of public (48%), private (52%), and other institutions.
2. Use of Social Media: This section included questions on the prevalence of social media monitoring and the extent to which admissions officers engage with specific aspects of an applicant's profile (e.g., posts, photos, comments). Questions in this section used a Likert scale (e.g., "Strongly Agree," "Agree," "Neutral," "Disagree," "Strongly Disagree") to capture nuanced perceptions.
3. Holistic Admissions Process: This section explored whether respondents believed social media aligned with their institution's holistic review process and if it enhanced their ability to assess diversity and "institutional fit."
4. Ethical and Legal Concerns: This section delved into institutional policies, training, and the perceived risks of implicit bias, misrepresentation, and privacy infringement.
5. Post-Affirmative Action Context: The final section addressed the potential impact of the Supreme Court ruling and executive directives on the current and future use of social media in admissions.

Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize and interpret the survey responses. The data from each question was exported from SurveyMonkey into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for analysis. Measures of central tendency (mean, median) and dispersion (standard deviation) were utilized to identify patterns and trends in the Likert scale data. Frequencies and percentages were used to quantify responses for both categorical and Likert-scale questions, allowing for a clear and concise presentation of the findings. Beyond descriptive measures, composite indices—specifically the Ethical Risk Index and the Diversity Utility Index—were created by averaging Likert-scale responses from related thematic items. These indices were developed to increase internal consistency and allow for inferential analysis, including Independent Samples T-tests to compare institutional groups and Pearson correlations to determine the relationship between perceived utility and future intent. The open-ended responses to the qualitative question was analyzed thematically, with common themes being identified and categorized. All study data is publicly available via Mendeley Data (Karpeles, 2025).

Results

Of an initial population of 5,137 admissions professionals, a total of 532 completed the survey, representing over a 10% response rate. While higher response rates are ideal, this return is consistent with established benchmarks for professional and online surveys. Based on this data, the study reveals a significant disconnect between perceived media influence and actual practice.

Respondent Demographics

To maintain anonymity of the respondents, no individual and/or personal demographic information was collected including race, location, or even IP address. The only demographics pertained to whether the respondent in fact reviewed applications as part of their job description and how long they've worked in college admissions. Answering "no" to the first question or "less than 1 year" to the second question resulted in automatic disqualification and expulsion from the survey. Respondents were only asked to provide the type of university (i.e., public, private, religious, HBCU, etc.) they worked for. No additional demographic data pertained to the study. The survey sample represented a balanced mix of institution types. Of the 532 respondents, 48% were from public institutions, while 52% were from private institutions. A small number of respondents were from specialized institutions, including liberal arts and/or art institutes (17%), religious colleges (9%), HBCUs (2%), and technical institutes (1%). This distribution provides a comprehensive representation of the admissions landscape.

Prevalence and Use of Social Media Monitoring

The core finding of this study is the low prevalence of social media monitoring. When asked, "Do you review applicants' social media profiles as part of your admissions process?", the overwhelming majority, 85%, reported No. Only a small fraction, 15%, reported "Yes" or "Occasionally." This is a stark contrast to the 35% and 28% figures frequently cited by the Kaplan surveys (2017, 2024), suggesting that social media monitoring is not a mainstream practice in the field.

The data on the extent of engagement with social media profiles was equally revealing. When asked how frequently they engaged with specific aspects of an applicant's profile, respondents consistently reported "Never" at a high rate:

- 75% of respondents reported "Never" engaging with posts.
- 77% of respondents reported "Never" reviewing photos or videos.
- 84% of respondents reported "Never" reviewing comments or interactions.

The data reveals a significant and complex reality: While a majority of admissions officers reported no influence, a significant minority indicated that a student's social media has, in some capacity, affected an admissions decision. When asked if a student's social media had ever influenced a committee's decision, 74% of admissions officers reported that it had no influence. In contrast, 42% of admissions officers indicated that social media had influenced at least one applicant's outcome. In cases where social media was a factor, the outcomes included: denial (3% early action, 5% regular decision), deferral (1% early action, 1% waitlist), acceptance (2% early action, 2% regular decision), or a rescinded offer of acceptance (23%). The percentages add up to more than 100% because the two groups are not mutually exclusive. An admissions officer might have truthfully reported that social media had no influence on their general work, as it's not typically a factor in most decisions; however, some also acknowledged a specific, rare instance where social media did play a role, placing them in both categories.

A crucial finding from this study is that social media can have serious, life-altering consequences for a significant number of students who have previously received offers of acceptance. This finding aligns with well-documented public examples of colleges taking such action. For

instance, Harvard University rescinded acceptance offers to at least ten students after they were found to have been trading sexually explicit and offensive memes in a private Facebook chat group (Natanson, 2017). In other cases, universities like Marquette and the University of Florida have rescinded offers for racist social media posts (Howard, 2022; Neelakantan, 2020). The former admissions director at Tulane, Jeff Schiffman, has also publicly stated that "The most frequent reason I rescind admissions is dumb stuff you do on social media," underscoring the real-world application of this policy (Schiffman, 2019). These examples reinforce that while social media has a minimal influence on initial college admissions decisions for the majority of applicants, it can have a powerful and significant negative impact on a smaller, though notable, portion of students.

Perceptions on Holistic Admissions and Diversity

Admissions professionals are highly skeptical of social media's value in a holistic review. The weighted average for the statement, "Social media is a major factor in evaluating applicants," was 4.54 (on a 5-point scale where 5 is "Strongly Disagree"), indicating a powerful consensus that social media is not a primary admissions metric. This is further supported by the fact that only 7% of respondents agreed that social media aligns with their institution's holistic admissions process, and a mere 11% believed it enhances their ability to assess diversity.

Ethical Concerns and Policies

The ethical landscape surrounding social media in admissions is complex and fraught with concern. A staggering 87% of respondents believed that evaluating applicants based on social media could potentially lead to implicit bias. This is a crucial finding, as it indicates a strong awareness of the ethical risks, even among those who may be engaging in the practice. The data also reveals a significant lack of formal institutional policy to address these concerns:

- 78% of respondents reported their institution has no formal policy regarding the use of social media in admissions.
- 59% of respondents believed that all colleges should establish formal policies to ensure fairness and transparency.
- 74% of respondents believed there should be clear guidelines for what constitutes acceptable use to avoid bias.

These findings highlight a significant disconnect between the perceived ethical risks and the institutional safeguards in place to mitigate them. To further investigate the impact of institutional oversight, an Independent Samples T-test was conducted to compare ethical concern levels. Results indicate that admissions officers at institutions lacking formal policies report significantly higher scores on the Ethical Risk Index ($M = 3.42$) compared to those at institutions with established guidelines ($M = 2.78$), $t(501) = 2.89$, $p = .004$. This suggests that a lack of institutional policy is not a neutral stance but is statistically linked to heightened ethical anxiety among frontline staff.

Post-Affirmative Action Context

The data on the impact of the Supreme Court's ruling on affirmative action reveals a cautious, almost hesitant, approach to using social media. The hypothesis that colleges would increasingly rely on social media to assess diversity post-ruling was not supported by the data. When asked if this would happen, 43% said No and 49% were Unsure, with only 8% saying Yes. This is a critical finding that challenges speculation about how institutions are adapting to the new legal landscape. The data suggests that admissions professionals are not turning to social media as a new proxy for race-based considerations. However, inferential analysis reveals a significant divide within the profession. A T-test conducted on the 'Predictor' group (those who believe reliance will increase) shows they hold significantly higher beliefs in the tool's utility for assessing marginalized perspectives ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 0.88$) than the 'Skeptic' group ($M = 2.36$, $SD = 0.92$), $t\,(501) = 3.26$, $p = .001$. A Pearson correlation revealed a highly significant relationship ($r = .335$, $p < .001$) between the perceived 'diversity utility' of social media and the specific intent to use it as a supplement for race-based evaluations.

Discussion

The findings of this study directly and forcefully challenge the prevailing media and public narrative surrounding the use of social media in college admissions. The assertion by outlets that 28% of admissions officers are actively monitoring student profiles is a significant overstatement. Our data, gathered from a comprehensive and diverse sample of 532 admissions professionals, demonstrates that a mere 15% of respondents review social media. This discrepancy exposes the disconnect identified in the literature between media-driven headlines and actual professional practice, suggesting that proprietary snapshots often inflate the perceived prevalence of monitoring (Schaffer, 2024). This professional resistance is best understood through the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). According to TAM, adoption is driven by "perceived usefulness"; admissions professionals clearly perceive social media as having low utility for high-stakes decisions due to its potential for misrepresentation (Davis & Granić, 2024). This directly shapes their "intentions" under TPB, where the perceived professional norm of fairness and the lack of "behavioral control" over digital data leads most officers to reject the practice entirely (Ajzen, 1991).

However, the study reveals a paradox: a practice with a minimal prevalence has a life-altering impact when it does occur, particularly in the 23% of cases where offers are rescinded. This finding provides a practical application of Self-Presentation Theory (Goffman, 1959). While applicants utilize curated "front stage" profiles to align with institutional expectations, admissions officers appear to use social media as a "performance check." A rescission occurs when a "back-stage" slip—such as hate speech—shatters the curated persona, leading the officer to conclude that the applicant's managed self-image was a misrepresentation of their true character. By prioritizing this reactive policing of conduct over the assessment of academic fit, admissions offices have unintentionally mirrored the federal government's security-based screening protocols for student visas (Campbell, 2025; Wong, 2025).

The data reveals a profound 'Ethical Vacuum' within the admissions process: while nearly 90% of professionals recognize the risk of implicit bias, the statistically significant disparity in concern levels between policy-protected and non-protected officers ($p = .004$) proves that this vacuum is a measurable reality. In the absence of institutional guardrails, the 'digital gatekeeper'

is forced to operate on personal discretion, transforming the digital footprint from a holistic tool into a unilateral exclusionary filter. This structural failure provides the empirical explanation for the 39-point "Execution Gap" noted in the literature, while practitioners may philosophically deem social media "fair game," the absence of formal policy prevents that belief from manifesting as a standard professional behavior (Schaffer, 2024). This disconnect reinforces the Constructivist premise that an applicant's 'character' is not an objective truth but a subjective construction built through the inherent biases of the observer (Fosnot, 2005). Furthermore, this lack of formal guidelines highlights a Critical Theory concern: the power dynamics inherent in admissions allow for the evaluation of online identities to potentially reinforce existing social inequalities without oversight.

Regarding the impact of the 2023 Supreme Court ruling, the findings reveal a cautious institutional response. On the surface, the data suggests a high level of caution, with only 8% of admissions professionals predicting an increased reliance on social media to assess diversity. This majority consensus directly refutes the legal speculation that social media would serve as a pervasive "run around" the court's decision (Robert, Reuter, & Chan, 2023). However, a nuanced quantitative analysis reveals that this small group represents a significant ideological shift. While 92% of the profession remains hesitant or unsure, the statistical link between "diversity utility" and "post-SCOTUS reliance" ($p = .001$) indicates that the "digital backdoor" to affirmative action is not merely speculative for this distinct subset of practitioners. This strategic focus aligns with Social Learning Theory, as these officers learn about an applicant's unique background by observing digital cues and reacting to behaviors that substitute for traditional metrics (Bandura & Walters, 1977). By utilizing a Pearson correlation ($r = .335$, $p < .001$), this study proves that for these officers, social media is being positioned as a primary "workaround" to fill the information gap created by the removal of race-based metrics. This refutes the idea that the profession will remain entirely race-blind; rather, it suggests that for a specific segment of the field, the digital footprint has become a strategic tool for navigating the new race-neutral legal landscape. Ultimately, while the profession may publicly distance itself from ethical risks, the underlying intent to maintain diversity persists through these newly adapted digital channels.

Results of Research Questions

Research suggests that social media's role in college admissions is often misunderstood. While it is not a routine part of the evaluation process, it can have serious consequences when it is used. The results of each of the four research questions are explained below.

1. How does social media monitoring influence decision-making and outcomes in college admissions?

The data indicates that social media monitoring is not a widespread or routine practice in college admissions, but when it is used, its influence can be severe. Only 0.71% of respondents reported that they regularly review applicants' social media profiles, and two-thirds (66%) do not believe it should even be used as a secondary tool to traditional materials. This finding strongly challenges the perception that admissions officers are actively and consistently monitoring student's digital lives. However, the study reveals a critical paradox: despite its minimal use, social media can have a life-altering impact on a student's admissions outcome. For example, a significant

23% of respondents have used an applicant's social media content as a reason to rescind a previously accepted offer.

In contrast, its influence on other decisions is far less common, with only 5% of respondents reporting it led to a denial in the regular decision cycle. These findings suggest that while social media is rarely a factor in the vast majority of cases, its use is reserved for situations that can lead to serious consequences. This finding provides a nuanced application of self-presentation theory. While applicants utilize curated profiles to manage their self-image and align with admissions expectations (Goffman, 1959), admissions officers appear to use social media primarily as a 'performance check' rather than a discovery tool. Through the lens of social learning theory, officers are learning about applicants not through routine observation, but by reacting to 'slips' in the curated mask—such as hate speech or bullying—that violate the social norms of the academic community (Bandura & Walters, 1977).

2. What are the perceptions of college admissions officers regarding the use of social media as a tool?

Overall, admissions officers hold a skeptical view of social media as an effective tool for evaluating applicants. A dominant majority of respondents (66%) strongly disagreed with the statement that social media is a major factor in evaluating applicants. This sentiment is consistent across several questions within the survey. Only a small percentage of respondents (7%) believe that social media aligns with a holistic admissions process, and an even smaller percentage (12%) believe it enhances their ability to assess diversity.

The study directly challenges media speculation that social media would become a proxy for race after the 2023 Supreme Court ruling on affirmative action. A vast majority of respondents (71%) believe it is either "unlikely" or "not at all likely" that social media will be used for this purpose. This professional consensus shows that admissions officers see a fundamental mismatch between the kind of information social media provides and the principles of a fair and equitable review. This mismatch is statistically reinforced by the Diversity Utility Index ($M = 2.65$), which suggests that even those who use the tool do not fully trust it to provide a 'comprehensive view' of diversity. The strong correlation ($r = .335$) between predicted use and diversity utility suggests that any future adoption of social media monitoring will likely be driven by institutional desperation to fill the 'information gap' left by the 2023 Supreme Court ruling rather than a genuine belief in the tool's efficacy.

The professional consensus against using social media as a proxy for diversity can be explained by the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). According to Davis & Granić (2024), adoption is driven by 'perceived usefulness'; here, admissions professionals clearly perceive social media as having low utility for high-stakes decision-making due to its potential for misrepresentation. This shapes their 'intentions' under the Theory of Planned Behavior, where the perceived norm of professional fairness outweighs the ease of access to digital data (Ajzen, 1991).

3. What are the ethical implications associated with social media monitoring in admissions decisions?

The survey reveals a high level of awareness and concern among admissions professionals about the ethical pitfalls of social media monitoring. The most significant finding is that an over-

whelming 87% of respondents believe that evaluating applicants based on their social media activity could potentially lead to implicit bias. This concern is a major deterrent to widespread use of the practice. The study also highlights a significant institutional vacuum: 78% of institutions lack a formal policy regarding the use of social media in admissions. This disconnect between ethical awareness and institutional policy reinforces the Constructivist premise that an applicant's "character" is not an objective truth but a subjective construction built through the social interactions and inherent biases of the observer (Fosnot, 2005). This lack of guidance is a critical concern for admissions officers themselves, with a majority of respondents agreeing that institutions should establish formal policies (59%) and clear guidelines to ensure fairness and transparency (75%). Additionally, the data shows that most professionals feel unprepared to interpret online content accurately. A combined 88% of respondents have either a major or minor concern about social media misrepresenting a student's true character, and 79% report that their institution does not provide training on how to distinguish an applicant's curated online persona from their true self. From a Critical Theory perspective, this absence of institutional guardrails allows for the evaluation of online identities to potentially reinforce existing social inequalities without oversight.

4. How can educating high school students and their parents about responsible Internet practices help them navigate the potential impact of social media on college admissions?

While the study shows that social media is not a primary factor in college admissions, its potential impact is severe enough to warrant education and caution. The finding that 23% of respondents have rescinded an offer of acceptance based on social media content is a powerful justification for students and parents to be proactive about their digital footprints. Education should focus on the fact that while social media is generally not used for routine evaluation, it can be a source of serious concern for admissions officers, particularly in extreme situations. The data supports this by showing that a majority of officers (59%) would consider excluding a candidate based on serious issues like hate speech or bullying. College advisors and educators can help students and parents understand that most admissions officers are wary of the content they find online, given the overwhelming consensus that social media can lead to misjudgments (86%) and misrepresentation (88%). Therefore, teaching students to maintain a responsible and authentic online presence is crucial not because it will necessarily boost their chances, but because it will mitigate the risk of a severe, negative outcome. This proactive approach can help students and parents understand that having a positive digital footprint is about a lot more than just not having a negative one.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers a comprehensive data-driven account, it is subject to several limitations. The use of a convenience sample, while providing a large number of responses, may not be fully representative of the entire population of admissions professionals. Future research could employ a more stratified random sampling method to ensure a more representative sample. Furthermore, the study is quantitative in nature and does not delve into the qualitative reasons for why admissions officers choose to monitor social media or the specific types of content they find influential. Future qualitative studies, such as in-depth interviews with admissions professionals, could provide a richer understanding of the motivations and decision-making processes behind this practice.

Areas for Improvement in Future Studies

Reflecting on the study's design, several key areas could be improved upon in future research to enhance the quality and depth of the findings. These improvements would address some of the inherent challenges of survey-based research.

Question Wording and Style

The current survey's questions, while effective, could be made more precise. For example, the question "Do you review applicants' social media profiles as part of your admissions process?" could be expanded to include specific scenarios. A future study could ask, "Do you or anyone on your team review an applicant's social media *if a red flag is raised in their application materials*?" This would provide a more nuanced understanding of the triggers for social media monitoring. Additionally, for Likert-scale questions, a "Not Applicable" or "Don't Know" option would capture respondents who are genuinely unsure, rather than forcing a neutral response.

Type of Response Options

The response options could be refined to better differentiate between varying degrees of engagement. Instead of just "Yes" or "Occasionally," a future study could use a scale that reflects frequency more accurately, such as "Daily," "Weekly," "Only when directed," or "Only if a concern is reported." This would help to distinguish between routine monitoring and the reactive, case-by-case reviews that the data suggests.

Addressing Self-Reporting Bias

To mitigate self-reporting bias—where respondents may answer based on what they perceive as the "correct" or "ethical" response—future studies could use a mixed-methods approach. Combining the survey data with a qualitative component, such as a series of structured interviews with admissions officers, would allow for a deeper exploration of their motivations. Interviews could reveal the underlying reasons for their responses, providing context that a simple quantitative survey cannot. For example, an interview might reveal that an admissions officer who reported "Never" reviewing social media has been explicitly told by their institution not to do so.

Expanding the Scope

While this study focused on admissions professionals, a future study could expand the sample to include high school counselors and students themselves. This would provide a richer, more holistic view of the entire college admissions ecosystem. Understanding student perceptions of how their social media is being viewed—and what they are doing to manage their digital footprint—would be a powerful addition to the academic literature.

Conclusion

This study has confirmed that social media monitoring is a minimal practice in college admissions, not an essential tool for evaluation; however, it also demonstrates that when the practice is used, its impact can be profound. This empirical reality dismantles the media-driven narrative of pervasive monitoring, confirming that the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) favors professional skepticism over digital adoption (Davis & Granić, 2024). While the headlines might tell you otherwise, you can finally put down the digital scrub brush. The truth is more nuanced: your social media is most likely a private party, but for a smaller, significant portion of applicants, that party can be a potential deal-breaker. This finding validates the role of social media as a 'performance check' for curated personas (Goffman, 1959), where reactive policing of conduct mirrors federal scrutiny postures rather than holistic academic review (Campbell, 2025). This research provides a foundation for future studies and the creation of targeted educational initiatives that can foster a more equitable and transparent admissions process for all stakeholders. By addressing the 'Ethical Vacuum' through formal institutional policy, the field can mitigate the subjective constructions and power imbalances inherent in unregulated digital gatekeeping (Fosnot, 2005). So while your mom was wrong about colleges watching your every move, she was right about one thing: if you act like a fool online, don't be surprised when the ivory tower slams its doors.

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