THE RESEARCH AGENDA

Digital Swag and College Students: Exploring 21st Century Digital Admissions, Recruitment, and Yield Collateral

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> As admissions counselors expanded their footprint in online spaces to connect with prospective students and families during COVID-19, the same has been done by many institutions—for years and long before the pandemic—with digital swag. This study will provide a baseline from which enrollment managers can understand how "digital swag" is being used and whether such an approach would be beneficial for their institution.

As of 2022, United States higher education is undergoing three critical developments that will fundamentally change the college-going population and how enrollment managers recruit and yield students well into the 21st century. First, the U.S. college-going population is approaching a "looming enrollment cliff" in 2025 (Kline 2019, para. 3), owed in part to the country's declining birth rate, largely due to the 2008 Great Recession. Economists forecast that the number of college students will fall by more than 15 percent after the year 2025, with the sharpest declines in the Midwest (WI, IL, IN, Ohio) and North Atlantic (NY, MA, PA) (Kline 2019) regions. This likely means that elite institutions who attract "a small, niche market" of students will be relatively unscathed by this phenomenon, while tuition-reliant institutions, small liberal arts colleges, and institutions without strong Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) programs may face dramatic budget cuts, forced mergers, or closures (Barshay 2018, para. 2). In the coming years, nearly all institutions in the United States will experience an amplified sense of competition for an increasingly smaller pool of traditional age (18–24), first time in college (FTIC) students. As a result, institutions must adapt to this shifting demographic and explore new and creative ways to recruit and yield Gen Z and beyond.

Second, the entire globe is amidst an ongoing technological revolution akin to the "dot-com" boom in the 1990s, led by advances in computer processors, physical memory storage, lithium metal batteries, and graphics card speed (Massachusetts Institute of Technology 2021). These technological advances have helped facilitate higher education's mass movement toward online learning and virtual reality education environments (Marks and Thomas 2022). Coupled with the 2025 enrollment cliff, institutions must maintain pace with technology to recruit and yield students across multiple modes of learning across the world. Maintaining pace with technology has meant increasing investment in enrollment management tactics such as facilitating virtual college tours, staffing web developers to publish high-quality websites, and producing more digital communication than any other generation in higher education's history (Harvey-Smith 2022). Subsequently, lesser-resourced institutions may struggle to keep up with both the pace of technology and its associated human and financial costs.

Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused considerable strain to humanity, and neither institutions nor students are, or have been, exempt from this strain. From March 2020, when the pandemic began, to spring 2022, nearly one million fewer students enrolled in higher education. (Whitford 2022b). On the institution side, from 2020 to 2021, colleges and universities cut 650,000 jobs, representing nearly 13 percent of the overall postsecondary workforce in the United States (Bauman 2021). As of 2022, many institutions across the country are still not operating at full capacity and are suffering through both budget cuts and lost positions in addition to a hypercompetitive labor market (Wadhwani 2022). These events indicate that as population shifts and technology advancements influence the enrollment management industry, many institutions will likely operate with understaffed units and smaller budgets for recruitment and yield initiatives.

Ultimately, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed how enrollment management offices recruit prospective students, especially given declines in enrollment. Subsequently, many recruitment and yield budgets may have been trimmed, resulting in less physical "swag" for students (a term for "stuff we all get," including physical items such as pennants, posters, T-shirts, notebooks, and more), known to be an important tool for yielding students and spreading institutional brand awareness (Selingo 2020). Given the challenges facing enrollment managers across the country, perhaps these managers could consider a 21st century marketing strategy that has revolutionized many other facets of society and could help recruit and yield college students: digital swag.

As admissions counselors expanded their footprint in online spaces to connect with prospective students and families during COVID-19, the same has been done by many institutions—for years and long before the pandemic—with "digital swag." As early as 2006, several colleges and universities created digital swag for both prospective and current student audiences. This digital swag has included digital stickers and GIFs signaling an admitted students' anticipated graduation year, desktop wallpapers, branded Zoom backgrounds, and customized Snapchat and Instagram filters. Of the earliest adopters of digital swag, the University of Notre Dame, Cal State-Long Beach, and the College of William & Mary all publish extensive collections of digital swag on their websites. For the College of William & Mary, their digital swag enables their students to say, "You made it! Share the good news and deck out your phone" (William & Mary 2022, para. 1). Similarly, on its digital swag page, Clemson University says:

> *This page offers you dozens of different ways to show what Clemson means to you. From mobile wallpaper to Zoom backgrounds, from party invitations to Instagram filters, you can have it all with a couple of clicks. See what we have and share your Clemson commitment with family and friends.* (Clemson University 2022, para. 1)

Ultimately, in the past decade, the rise of cryptocurrency and non-fungible tokens (NFTs) has shown that society is quickly moving many aspects of their lives into the digital realm. Now, people can exchange digital currency for digital goods from anywhere in the world, and recently, the University of Pennsylvania began accepting cryptocurrency as a form of tuition payment (Mulligan 2021). Moreover, NFT philanthropy is on the rise, as dozens of institutions across the country have created and sold NFTs to raise funds for capital projects, scholarships, and more (Whitford 2022a). Given these population and technological shifts, coupled with the challenges facing higher education and enrollment management budgets, an exploration into digital swag seems important and timely.

However, after an extensive literature search, this study is the first of its kind to explore "digital swag," reporting on which institutions produce it, where it lives on institutional websites, what kinds of digital swag institutions are producing, and what audiences are being targeted. Conducting this foundational research will inform the field of strategic enrollment management about this new and innovative method of engaging with prospective students. Ideally, this study will provide a baseline from which enrollment managers can understand how digital swag is being used and whether such an approach would be beneficial for their institution.

Methods

The following section will outline how the population and sample for the study was determined, how data was collected and analyzed, and how limitations were addressed. The dataset associated with this study is available from the authors upon request.

Study Population and Sample

Prior to this study, the authors conducted a preliminary analysis of institutions producing digital swag by simply performing an Internet search for digital swag and exploring each institutional website. One member of the research team works full-time in enrollment management, and after locating several institutions producing digital swag, the research team contacted those institutions and held brief phone discussions regarding how the digital swag came to be, who produced it, where it "lived" on the institutional website, for whom the digital swag was produced, and how it was decided which types of digital swag the institution would create. This approach was also adopted by Taylor and Childs (2022) in their recent essay regarding the purposes and possibilities of digital swag. After informally consulting with nearly a dozen enrollment management professionals across the country, the authors made the decision to perform a broad Internet search for three search terms that the professionals said may help in the search: digital swag, downloadable swag, and digital downloads. As a result, the authors considered it a possibility that any institution in the United States could produce digital swag and did not restrict the search to any institution type (public, private, two- and four-year institutions, for-profit institutions, etc.).

Data Collection

The authors hypothesized that many different types of organizations could produce digital swag for a variety of purposes. To narrow the search and limit results to institutional websites, the authors engaged with Google Advanced Search to hone down to three terms—digital swag, downloadable swag, and digital downloads. The authors delimited results to only .edu websites, and as they discovered digital swag pages, they gathered the institution's name, the URL of the website, the department responsible for publishing the website, and how the digital swag was described. Overall, the search yielded 89 websites and 88 unique institutions (two different departments from UNC-Greensboro produced digital swag websites). Moreover, 76 institutions described their websites as "digital swag;" five described the websites as "downloadable swag;" and eight described the websites as "digital downloads." A description of the institutions in the sample can be found in Figure 1.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, the authors first discussed the importance of conveying who produced digital swag, where it lived on the institutional website, and who the digital swag was created for. Then, independently, each member of the research team performed a first round of descriptive coding to capture the website location of the digital swag and the audience(s) of the digital swag. After, the research team reconvened to compare codes, and the team performed a second round of deductive coding to consolidate themes and better organize the data. Overall, the research team coded nine different website locations for digital swag: admissions; marketing and communications; a specialized swag website; alumni relations; commencement; advancement; parents and families; other institutional websites; and

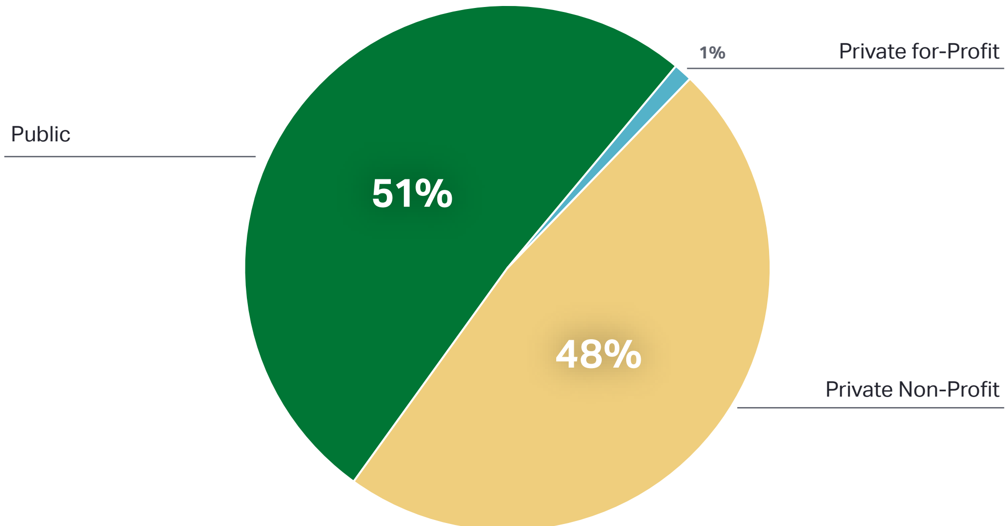

FIGURE 1 ➤ Share of Four-Year Institutions in Study Sample, by Classification (n=88)

Note: No two-year institutions published digital swag pages; there were 88 unique institutions in the study, but UNC-Greensboro published digital swag on two different department websites and was counted as one institution.

unique college or departmental websites. Moreover, the team coded seven unique audiences (or lack thereof) for digital swag: admitted students; parents; alums; new graduates; general audiences; other audiences; and no, or an unclear, audience. These results can be found in Table 1, on page 20.

Additionally, to explore the types of digital swag, the research team again performed a first round of descriptive coding to capture which types of digital swag are produced by institutions of higher education. The research team reconvened, compared codes, and performed a second round of deductive coding to consolidate themes and better organize the data. In all, the team coded nine unique types of digital swag, including: social media content; desktop wallpapers; mobile wallpapers; virtual backgrounds; printable goods; GIFs and stickers; Snapchat or Instagram filters and lenses; audio files; and other. These results can be found in Table 2, on page 21.

Finally, the research team discussed how it would be beneficial to create a visual for readers to see which institutions produce digital swag across the country. The authors hypothesized that digital swag may be a regional phenomenon or be localized to a certain region after one institution adopted the idea and the strategy was mimicked by nearby competition. Therefore, after gathering all institution names and URLs, the authors used the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) to locate the lines of longitude and latitude for each institution. The team plotted these lines on a geospatial map, and this data can be found in Figure 1.

Limitations

As with any study, especially one that is exploratory in nature, there are limitations. The authors attempted to network with enrollment managers across the country to understand where to start the search and how to locate digital swag websites. However, the search was exhausted after 89 websites (88 institutions), with the understanding that there are more than 7,000 institutions of higher education in the United States alone. The search did not extend beyond the United States, and that also represents a limitation of the study. Additionally, the research team could have missed institutions that

FIGURE 2 ➤ Geospatial Map of Unique Institutions Publishing Digital Swag (n=88)

described their digital swag using different parlance, or digital swag websites published on non-.edu websites. These websites may have included athletics websites, which are often published on .org or .com web locations. However, the relative novelty of this study may balance these limitations, with future research being addressed later in this article.

Findings

A geospatial map displaying institutions producing digital swag can be found in Figure 2. Results suggested considerable volume of digital swag on the Atlantic seaboard and Midwest regions of the United States, with few institutions producing digital swag in the mountain west, south, and west regions. Although there is little guiding research to explain this result, foundational research in enrollment management has asserted that recruitment and yield techniques may be mirrored by competing institutions (Dolence 1997; Hossler and Bontrager 2014). In this case, the exploratory data suggests that institutions may be mimicking other institutions' digital swag approaches to recruit and yield prospective students in the Midwest and Atlantic regions. Moreover, the exploratory research was not able to identify when digital swag websites were initially published but was able to discern that Duke University and the University of Notre Dame (included in this study's sample) published their digital swag websites as far back as 2018. As a result, enrollment managers may want to explore if their competition is producing digital swag and how this collateral is positioned within recruitment and yield campaigns.

Data regarding the website location and audiences of digital swag can be found in Table 1. Regarding website location, most digital swag websites were published within institutional admissions websites, namely sections for admitted students. More than 30 percent of all digital swag websites were located on admissions websites, suggesting that many institutions produce digital swag to recruit and yield prospective students. However, data suggests that institutions create and publish digital swag in other locations, such as an institutional marketing and communications website (13.5 percent of the sample) and a unique digital swag website (13.5 percent

TABLE 1 Website Location and Audience of Digital Swag (n=89)

	n	%
Website Location		
Admissions	28	31.5
Marketing/Communications	12	13.5
Unique "Swag" Website	12	13.5
Alumni Relations	7	7.9
Commencement	6	6.7
Advancement	3	3.3
Parents and Families	2	2.2
Other Institutional Website	10	11.3
Unique College/Department	9	10.1
Overall	89	100.0
Audience		
Admitted students	40	44.9
Parents	9	10.1
Alums	7	7.9
New Graduates	17	19.1
General Audience	30	33.7
Other Audience	2	2.2
No Audience[1]	1	1.1
Overall[2]	89	100.0

[1] The Citadel has published a digital swag website but said the site was under construction as of February 2022.

[2] Actual percentage over 100%, as multiple digital swag websites targeted multiple audiences.

of the sample). These websites were not connected to any other institutional website. Here, the placement of digital swag websites may indicate who produced the swag and, therefore, who "owns" the swag (*i.e.*, marketing and communications departments). Otherwise, the placement of digital swag may indicate an institution's desire for the swag to live on its own and cater to many different audiences, evidenced by institutions publishing unique digital swag websites.

In addition to admissions websites, digital swag appeared on many other institutional websites and was targeting other non-prospective student audiences. For instance, digital swag appeared on alumni relations, commencement, advancement, and parent and family websites, addressing audiences such as alums, recent graduates, donors and philanthropists, and students' support networks. Additionally, many individual colleges and departments published their own digital swag pages. These examples included The Ohio State University's College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences (The Ohio State University 2022), the University of Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business (University of Maryland 2022), and the University of Michigan's Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy (University of Michigan 2022). Here, institutions in this study largely published digital swag on admissions websites for prospective students, but digital swag appeared in many different places on institutional websites. Thus, digital swag may be seen as valuable collateral for campus units beyond enrollment management.

Regarding audience, many institutions published digital swag on their admissions website and then directly addressed prospective student audiences, usually with "Class of 2026" messaging on various forms of digital swag. As evidenced by the website location of digital swag, institutions also addressed many other audiences, including parents, alumni, and new graduates. However, many digital swag collections did not address any audience—coded as "general audience" in Table 1—as these swag collections contained general collateral that often featured notable campus landmarks or the institutional mascot without addressing any particular stakeholder. Finally, two institutions created digital swag for staff and for grandparents to help celebrate their grandchild's admission to the institution.

Data regarding the types of digital swag can be found in Table 2, on page 21. Overwhelmingly, data in this study suggests that institutions create social media content (Facebook and Twitter headers, Instagram posts, Facebook frames, etc.) for a wide variety of audiences. In all, more than 70 percent of institutions produced this type of digital swag, suggesting that institutions value placing their branding within individuals' social media accounts, including admitted students' accounts. To possibly address a broader audience, institutions also regularly produced desktop (60.2 percent of the sample) and mobile wallpapers (53.4 percent of the sample), as well as virtual (Zoom and Teams) backgrounds (47.7 percent of the sample). Here, perhaps due to the pandemic,

TABLE 2 ➤ Types of Digital Swag Published by Institutions of Higher Education (n=88)

Type	n	%
Social Media Content (headers, posts, frames, etc.)	64	72.7
Desktop Wallpapers	53	60.2
Mobile Wallpapers	47	53.4
Virtual Backgrounds	42	47.7
Printable Goods	30	34.1
GIFs / Stickers	23	26.1
Snapchat / Instagram Filters and Lenses	8	9.1
Audio	5	5.7
Other[1]	25	28.4

[1] Other category included digital swag such as digital watch faces, coloring books, and other forms of digital swag that could be both printed and digitally enjoyed.

institutions have produced wallpapers and backgrounds to place their brand in strategic digital locations to expand their reach.

Also salient in the data was a phenomenon related to digital swag that the researchers did not anticipate: In all, 34.1 percent of the sample produced some type of digital swag meant to be printed (coded as "printable goods" in Table 2). These printable goods included many items that are normally physical, such as institutional calendars, maps of campus, posters, pennants, and yard signs. However, many institutions demonstrated their sense of creativity when creating digital swag meant to be printed but could be digitally enjoyed (coded as "other" in Table 2). This category included branded coloring books, Bingo! cards, Mad Libs pages, foldable holiday ornaments, foldable facemasks, and cake toppers. In fact, Clemson University produced several cake and cupcake toppers with instructions for parents and families to send the digital file to their local bakery to be printed on their student's high school graduation cake. However, the digital files could have also been used as a desktop wallpaper or for a similar use. Here, institutions producing digital swag with printing instructions may be passing costs onto their consumers. This strategy may save valuable resources if stakeholders (students, parents, etc.) are willing to bear the cost of physical printing, possibly recapturing funds that could be used to recruit or yield more students through other means.

Additionally, several institutions produced technologically-savvy pieces of digital swag, including a customizable institution watch face, GIFs and text message stickers, Snapchat and Instagram filters and lenses, and forms of audio. Several institutions curated Spotify playlists as part of their digital swag collections featuring songs that represent the institution. Other institutions created ringtones or mobile alert sounds inspired by institutional alma maters or fight songs. Here, data suggests institutions are not only embracing modern, trendy forms of digital technology (Snapchat, Instagram, etc.), but institutions are also branching beyond social media branding to integrate their brand into many digital aspects of people's lives, including their text messages, their music habits, and their digital entertainment. As a result, enrollment managers who are not utilizing digital swag as part of their recruitment and yield efforts may want to consider such a strategy to increase their branding footprint in both the digital and physical lives of admitted students and other stakeholders.

Discussion and Conclusion

As the first study of its kind to explore digital swag and its location, audience, and type, this study makes several important contributions to the literature and the practice of strategic enrollment management. First, data in this study demonstrates that institutions may be starting to view digital swag as a part of their recruiting and yield strategy, with many institutions positioning their digital swag collections as part of their admissions website to target admitted students. However, many institutions published digital swag collections in different locations and for different audiences, speaking perhaps to a larger movement within higher education of providing audiences with digital versions of institutionally branded items to raise brand awareness and increase the visibility of an institution across many digital spaces.

From this research, there are many implications for researchers and practitioners working in enrollment management. On the research side, future studies should interact with students to learn whether digital swag influences a student's decision to apply to and enroll in a certain institution. Historically, research has shown that critical elements of a student's decision involve academic fit, competitive and adequate funding, distance from home, and a student's overall sense of belonging on campus (Dolence 1997; Hossler and Bontrager 2014). Yet, as students' lives shift more toward a digital reality and sense of being, perhaps digital swag—including future initiatives involving NFTs and institution-specific cryptocurrency—may work to yield prospective students.

For practitioners, there are many use cases for digital swag, and especially during a pandemic or endemic era in higher education, digital swag for prospective students may become increasingly viable and attractive. First, digital swag is likely more cost effective than physical swag: Hiring a graphic designer to create an iPhone watch face that can be downloaded infinitely may be less expensive and more attractive for young people than a pencil or wristband. Additionally, digital swag is easily updated for new years of entering classes and can be delivered instantly, removing the need (and cost) to rely on unpredictable material prices, complex supply chains, and physical shipping. Considering everything involved with conceptualizing, purchasing, and delivering physical items, suddenly digital swag seems more appealing and practical to send to a student rather than a pennant or coffee mug that the student may never use.

Second, digital swag is just that—digital, and thus, easily manipulated and evergreen. This manipulability allows for digital swag to be repurposed for multiple recruitment cycles and easily customized for many different audiences. For instance, much of the parent-facing digital swag included messaging like Duke University's "Proud Parent of a Future Blue Devil." Here, "parent" could be replaced with friend, grandparent, aunt, uncle, etc.—with little to no cost incurred. The same can be said for many forms of digital swag, such as desktop and mobile wallpapers, as well as virtual meeting backgrounds. Inversely, physical goods are limited in their manipulability and likely cannot address multiple audiences at once. Additionally, once digital swag is created, the collection may survive for years. It is difficult to envision a future without a computer, phone, or now a Zoom call, meaning that digital swag associated with these spaces are evergreen. For these reasons, digital swag could be low-cost, highly durable goods that can express the same institutional branding as a physical item, only in a digital space. Moreover, many institutions created digital swag meant to be printed, such as yard signs and cake toppers. This innovation could allow institutions to place branding in new and creative spaces, shifting the cost to the consumer, with the only expense being the graphic designer to create the content and the website to host the content.

Ultimately, the movement toward all things digital is not unique to higher education. Consider the rise of cryptocurrency (*i.e.*, Bitcoin) and "nonfungible tokens" or "NFTs" that are rapidly taking the place of physical objects such as paintings, tickets, and other forms of physical goods. Then, consider the aforementioned "enrollment cliff" (Kline 2019, para. 3) and how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed how institutions recruit and yield students. If 21st century prospective students are becoming scarcer and living more of their lives in a digital world than ever before, enrollment managers should acknowledge this shift and explore "digital swag" for their own institutions, lest they be left behind in the physical world.

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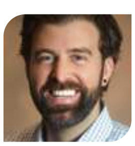

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