

CAMPUS RACIAL CLIMATE: HOW UNIVERSITY  
SOCIAL MEDIA EFFECTS AFRICAN AMERICAN  
STUDENT INCLUSION AT PREDOMINANTLY  
WHITE UNIVERSITIES

By

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Bachelor of Science in Strategic Communications

Oklahoma State University

Stillwater, Oklahoma

2015

Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate College of the  
Oklahoma State University  
in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
the Degree of  
MASTER OF SCIENCE  
May, 2017

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I must acknowledge God's love, grace, and protection that constantly surrounds me as I continue to grow as a person and a professional.

I also must acknowledge my mother, Nina Johnson, who has been a constant source of support and love throughout my life, especially during my time at Oklahoma State University

I would also like to thank the faculty and staff at the OSU College of Media & Strategic Communications, specifically Dr. Craig Freeman and Jami A. Fullerton, who provided me with the knowledge and skills to complete my education and embark upon my professional journey.

Finally, I extend my sincerest gratitude to Dr. Danny Shipka. Thank you for working so tirelessly to prepare me to become a successful student, researcher, and professional. Your confidence in me gave me the reassurance necessary to complete this thesis. Thank you for your mentorship and your constant encouragement that strengthen and inspire me to continue to grow professionally.

Name: STANZZA Y. PATTERSON

Date of Degree: MAY, 2017

Title of Study: CAMPUS RACIAL CLIMATE: HOW UNIVERSITY SOCIAL MEDIA  
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Major Field: MASS COMMUNICATIONS

Abstract: The portrayal of African Americans as a stigmatized and devalued group has contributed to the generality of racial inequality. Racial bias, disempowerment, and discrimination have been longstanding issues within several aspects of mainstream media, including television news, entertainment and advertising. This is also including social media, a platform in which many organizations and businesses are using to effectively communicate to their audiences. Universities around the country have begun using this type of media as their main tool to release messages to students. How these universities communicate with their minority population is of extreme importance. This study investigated the communications effectiveness of Oklahoma State University's social media pages in representing African American students.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Background**

The portrayal of African Americans as a stigmatized and devalued group has contributed to the generality of racial inequality (Kulaszewicz, 2015). Racial bias, disempowerment and discrimination have been longstanding issues within several aspects of mainstream media, includes television news, entertainment and advertising (Kulaszewicz, 2015). This also including social media, a platform by which many organizations and businesses are using to effectively communicate to their audiences. Universities around the country have begun using this type of media as the main tool to release messages to students. How these universities communicate with their minority population is of extreme importance. When African American students enter predominantly White colleges or universities, the experience of being a member of a numerical minority group may present challenges to the development of positive African American racial identity (Wilson & Constantine, 2016). Of all problems faced by African American students at predominantly White institutions, issues arising from isolation, alienation, and lack of support seem to be the most serious (Smith & Allen, 1984).

Higher education's duty to alleviate some of these issues has been shaken recently by the outbreak of unpleasant racial incidents on a number of college campuses across the



United States (Allen, 1992). In 2015, the University of Oklahoma (OU) was under a magnifying glass as the nation watched a racially-charged student-made video go public on mainstream media. In the video, members of the OU chapter of Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity were recorded singing a chant that included racial slurs against African Americans and a lynching reference (Svrluga, 2015). Although, university President David Boren, acted fast to punish the students seen in the video, African Americans on the OU's campus were left feeling unsafe and insulted. These students wanted university officials to continue their efforts to communicate the importance of diversity on campus, but university leadership ultimately fell short. In turn, African American students started groups such as OU Unheard, which was created for minorities to have a larger and more direct voice on campus.

Following this incident, Oklahoma State University students were outraged after two Caucasian women, who attended the university, were pictured in blackface, stating that they were celebrating Martin Luther King Jr. Day, on January 16, 2017. In the same week, on January 22, 2017, another Caucasian student was sighted on the social media app, Snapchat, in blackface, with a caption that read, "When he says he only likes black girls." With the history of blackface in this country, students were outraged and responded with scrutiny on social media.

African American students used social media applications such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to contact news stations and spread the word about their experiences at OSU. With this not being the first racially charged incident at the institution, the students also used social media to express their concerns, demand

consequences, and explain to the university that they had grown tired of students being blatantly disrespectful to African Americans with no punishment.

The official OSU Twitter issued a tweet that was sent to multiple students expressing their concern to its twitter that read, “OSU does not condone this insensitive behavior. We are meeting w/ students involved. The post has been deleted.” Following these incidents, President Burns Hargis issued two emails to OSU students, faculty, and staff after each incident was brought to his attention. The three students also issued public apologies using their social media.

Unsatisfied with the outcome, African American leaders on campus led a week full of protests and later met with President Hargis to discuss the incidents and what actions would be taken in the future. They contacted news stations and flooded social media with pictures, quotes and videos with the attached hashtag, “#CantFakeMelanin.” This grabbed the attention of media outlets and sought to educate their peers about African American history.

Students across the United States are being forced to take matters into their own hands in order to have a voice on these important issues. Many students feel that it should be administrators putting forth the effort to ensure minorities feel safe and included while on campus. But, students are often left with the job of communicating their importance and desire to feel embraced on their university campuses.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The understanding of what is needed for an African American student to experience personal and academic success has continuously been researched, and more

must still be known. Studies designed to understand the African American experience at predominantly White universities in the United States are common, but many studies fail to address the issues of internal communication between the university and its students (Scott & Rodriguez, 2014). Researchers have shown how racial experiences such as discrimination or lack of cultural representation on campus can create a stressful experience (Brown, Morning, & Watkins, 2005). Support from peers and faculty, and social support groups have helped reverse this effect.

This research will examine the impact that internal university communications have on African American students at predominantly White universities. It will seek to analyze the perceptions that African Americans have of university media and their representation in the media. More specifically, this research will look at how these universities use their social media platforms to communicate with African Americans, and if their efforts achieve the university stated goals.

The use of media outlets such as websites and social media may not be used to their full capability in connecting with African Americans. Media impact our beliefs, assumptions and our experiences (Kulaszewicz, 2015). Failure to be represented in university media may impact the experience that an African American has at predominantly White colleges and universities.

Are university officials at predominantly White universities using their communications outlets to help minorities? How effective university officials communicate with students is essential for their success on campus (Scott & Rodriguez, 2014).

Minority oppression in the United States has proven to have some effect on students' performance at school (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002). This research will examine minority students and how effectively they are communicated to while attending predominantly White universities (PWI). The university under study is Oklahoma State University, with 4.8% of its population being African American, and 70.7% Caucasian. Oklahoma State University represents one of the schools with the largest African American populations in the Big 12 (Forbes, 2016). This research will add to the growing body of literature by (a) examining effective communication to minorities; (b) provide a better understanding of the importance of cultural diversity in university communication; (c) expand our understanding of university communication tactics to minorities; (d) investigate how university officials use media outlets to communicate with minorities.

### **Representation in OSU's News and Information Department**

At Oklahoma State University, the news and information department is represented by seven Caucasian men and five Caucasian women. OSU has leaders of its news and information department that are Caucasian, but does not include a leader or member of the department that is African American. This alone could have some effect on the success that communicators have when trying to effectively reach minorities. Research has revealed that even when an institution is ready to commit more resources to the minority endeavor, its leadership often lacks clear direction on how best to expend these resources (Allen, 1992).

Cultural diversity research has shown that groups that used group decision making support systems out performed groups that did not (Daily & Steiner, 1998).

Cultural diversity in the workplace has a positive influence on decision making and influences selection of the communication media (Shachaf, 2008). Culturally diverse groups produce significantly higher numbers of non-redundant, realistic ideas than homogenous groups (Shachaf, 2008). Since cultural diversity has been assumed to critically impact team effectiveness, and aspects of diversity are likely to be amplified, this research will also investigate the appointed communications personnel at OSU, to examine if this could impact communication decisions.

This study will investigate the communication between university personnel and its effectiveness through social media. Effectiveness of communication will be judged by student responses through survey research and a content analysis of archived photo images and videos from the universities media. This research intends to find out if African American students feel represented on their campus, and if their representation is positive. The sample will include African American and Caucasian students ranging from ages 18-26 years old, who attend Oklahoma State University for the survey, and archived photos images and videos from the official OSU Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram pages, for the content analysis.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The study of effective communication with African Americans and administrators at predominantly White institutions has been ongoing for decades. The growing body of research in this area will be utilized as a part of the literature review as well as examining how the ethnicity of communications official's affects communications tactics. The section will conclude with a discussion of the authors proposed research questions.

#### **History**

African American students continue to be plagued by problems associated with access, retention, and achievement in the United States higher education (Allen, 1992). These issues have been stubbornly persistent, making it hard to create long-term and effective solutions. Disempowerment and discrimination in regard to race have been continuing issues within different aspects of the media, including television, web and social media. When applying this on a university scale, some of these same ideas apply to African Americans at predominantly White universities. With the first public schools being desegregated in the 1960s, African Americans were underrepresented and oppressed on these campuses (TeachingTolerance). During this time, a watershed decade in U.S. history, our society responded strongly to civil rights movement, making aggressive, widespread efforts to address many of the wrongs imposed on African Americas for centuries (Allen 1992).

Increasing the access that African Americans had to higher education was an optimal solution to the previous decades of problems driven by racial inequality. African American history in the United States is distinctive and quite different from other cultures. Persecution, subjection, and oppression have created unsettling stereotypes that now affect the existence of African American people (Kulaszewicz, 2015).

One cannot ignore the differences between African American students and their White peers. Differences stem from their parents often being more urban, having fewer years of education, working at lower status jobs, earning less, and more often being divorced or separated than Caucasian students' parents (Levin, Van Laar, & Foote, 2006). Despite these social, economic, and educational disadvantages, African-American college students have aspirations similar to (or higher than) their Caucasian counterparts; however, they reach these goals and aspirations less often than Caucasian students (Smith & Moore, 2002). While African Americans may perform at a lower rate than their Caucasian peers, these students attending predominantly White institutions seemingly experience considerable adjustment difficulties. Many of these adjustment issues are common among all college students, while others are unique to the African American community (Levin, Van Laar, & Foote, 2006).

In the 1900s, African Americans were portrayed in early films as ignorant, savage, or as criminals (Luther et al., 2012, p.59). These characters were often played by Caucasian people who painted themselves to appear Black. Not only were African Americans underrepresented, but when they were represented, it was by a Caucasian person and they were based on negative stereotypes. This sent out the message that African Americans were not "good enough" to represent themselves, and were seen as

lacking talent to fill a character role that only Caucasians could make up for (Kulaszewicz, 2015). With Caucasian people taking over these roles, the message to viewers was it was the desired race, and that they were the only qualified group to contribute to mainstream media (Luther, et al., 2012).

Since the early usage of media, the impact of how people are represented are essential to understanding how race portrayals impacts our society. The media provide understanding about different racial contexts, influences, thoughts and beliefs of others. The lack of representation in the media can often negatively affect the underrepresented group.

Steele and Aronson (1995) presented social-psychological research that examined the effects of widely known negative stereotype about one's group: "The existence of a negative stereotype means that anything one does or any of one's features that conform to it make the stereotype more plausible as a self-characterization in the eyes of others, and perhaps even in one's own eyes" (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p.797). This problem is known as the stereotype threat and is experienced by the members of any group where negative stereotypes exist. The stereotype threat was proposed to be a self-evaluative and self- threatening predicament student placed themselves in.

If university officials aren't using its media platforms to alleviate this threat, African Americans are more prone to feeling underrepresented and oppressed across the nation's campuses (Smith & Moore, 2002).



## **Why Does the Stereotype Threat Effect Minorities?**

Studies of African American students suggest that many have negative, alienated experiences in White institutions and that they suffer lower achievement and higher attrition than White students (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991). African American students, who attend predominately White colleges do not perform as well scholastically as their White counterparts, on average (Allen 1992). The debate on whether this issue stems from adjustment struggles or other factors is argued immensely.

The stereotype threat was coined based on Aronson and Steele's research on intellectual test performance of African American students. They stated that whenever African American students perform an academic or intellectual task, they face the threat of confirming a negative societal stereotype or suspicion about their group's intellectual ability and competence (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

In their study, researchers set up two environments for African American and Caucasian students to take the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), a stereotype threat condition and a non-stereotype threat condition. In the stereotype threat condition, they described the GRE as "diagnostic of intellectual ability," which made the racial stereotype about intellectual capability among African American participants significant (Steele & Aronson, 1995). In the non-stereotype threat condition, the same test was described simply as "a laboratory problem-solving task that was non-diagnostic of ability," which made racial stereotypes irrelevant to African Americans.

The results supported their theory in that, when African American students were presented with a negative environment, based on the stereotype for their inability to perform, they did worse on the test than their Caucasian counterparts. But, when their

race wasn't emphasized, students performed at the same rate or better. The fear and anxiety of confirming the stereotype for one's group and to themselves created a threat to the participant's academic performance.

In a higher-level education environment, research concluded that the stereotype threat has an impact on student progression, especially while studying at predominantly White colleges and universities. Being the only African American student in their class is very common, and it can create an intimidating environment for them to speak or learn in class. In typical academic settings, Caucasian student performance has become the standard, which all other minority groups must strive to attain (Scott & Rodriguez, 2014). With African Americans being misrepresented and underrepresented at predominantly White universities, they are more prone to being affected by this threat. African American students do not need a verbal reminder of their stereotype, but can feel the threat based on their surroundings, due to the threat being self-threatening. If their environment is filled with mostly Caucasian representation in their school media, it further reinforces the negative connotations that were presented in the early in history.

### **African American Experiences at the Collegiate Level**

Scott and Rodriguez (2014) conducted a study on African American academic persistence and career aspirations in education. They focused on three African American males' experiences with concentrated forms of stereotype threat in teacher education. Their research revealed dimensions of how power and privilege operate in teacher education (Scott & Rodriguez, 2014). There were three major themes that emerged from their research: (a) stereotype threat; (b) dealing with marginalization; and (c) significant

role models (p.12-18). These factors effected their schooling experiences and motivations to teach. Scott and Rodriguez (2014) found that the stereotype threat played a major role in their academic endeavors. The constant anxiety and worry about under achieving against their Caucasian counterparts had a direct effect on their academic performance and persistence to gain a career in education.

African Americans have experienced racial marginalization in America for decades. In the educational system, there is marginalization that African Americans have to face while learning at predominantly White universities. These men felt powerless in a lot of situations while attending school (Scott & Rodriguez, 2014).

Role models helped these young men in their academic pursuits, and made them strive to achieve as their role models did. When faced with someone who had experienced similar situations, it was easier for the men to push forward to earn their degree and made them more persistent to become educators (Scott & Rodriguez, 2014).

This research is important, because it provided three common themes that many African Americans face while attending college. To understand how students, feel and their experiences makes it easier to find solutions to help improve their experiences on college campuses.

### **Reducing the Stereotype Threat**

There has been much disagreement about the causes of African American educational under achievement, but a student's race matters (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002). In this study, researchers wanted to see if encouraging African American students could be used to affect student's academic engagement and achievement. Aronson, Fried

and Good (2002), sought to “persuade a group of students to adopt the view that their basic intelligence was malleable, that they could expand it with work” (p.116).

Research on attitude change shows that persuasive messages often fail to motivate people if the issues are important; and even when persuasion works well and the new attitude endures; it still may lack the necessary cognitive accessibility to guide behavior (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002). Using the “saying-is-believing effect” researchers suggested that attitude change is greatly adopted by getting people to encourage a specific position in their own words. In a setting where African Americans were encouraged, their test scores were almost equivalent or higher to that of their Caucasian counterparts, but when they were not, they did worse on their tests.

To improve the stereotype effect, they think that:

Shaping student’s conceptions of ability to promote more adaptive response to the inevitable frustrations and threats posed by racially integrated colleges and schools could easily become part of school curriculum, perhaps as a complement to other structure- altering approaches, such as cooperative learning and other forms of intergroup communication that have also proved useful in addressing minority student underachievement (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002, p.124).

With the usage of media platforms, university officials have the power to reach out to African Americans in a positive light, further influencing their motivation to continue their education. Persuasive messages increase the likelihood of African American retention, and representation is an important part of this (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002).

## **African Americans at Historically Black Colleges & Universities**

Research comparing African American student experiences and academic achievements at predominately White institutions (PWI), and Historically Black Colleges and Universities, (HBCU), continues to grow. Although, African Americans are able to make the right adjustments to succeed on predominantly White campuses, studies have shown that African Americans typically perform better at historically Black universities (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991). Although research has shown many of these findings to be true, these comparisons between African Americans on predominantly White campuses, versus historically Black campuses are based more on conjecture than fact (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991). Based on historical conditioning, White campuses provide superior environments for African American educational development. Allen (1985) reveals that the academic needs for African Americans don't match with academic expectations on White campuses.

Gurin and Epps (1975) finds African American students who attended Black colleges possessed positive self-images, strong racial pride, high aspirations, while maintaining a better psychosocial adjustment to college than African Americans on White campuses. African American students on Black campuses have advantages over Black students on White campuses in many aspects such as: more psychological adjustments, more significant academic gains, and greater cultural awareness (Allen, 1992). African Americans feel a sense of being welcomed on campus, rather than intense climates, that can be a direct effect of the stereotype threat. On predominantly White campuses, African American students emphasize feelings of alienation, sensed hostility, racial discrimination, and lack of integration; while on historically Black campuses, they

emphasize feelings of engagement, connection, acceptance, and extensive support and encouragement (Allen, 1992). These supportive environments on Black campuses make African Americans feel safe to take risks associated with their intellectual growth and development.

Campus racial environment is associated with academic achievement (Allen, 1992). In retrospect, African American students who attend predominantly White schools report lower college grades, less favorable relations with their professors, and are, on average, younger than their peers who attend historically Black institutions (Allen, 1992). Some of the most important influences on African American students' academic achievement, included social context, interpersonal relationships, and campus environments.

“Historically Black universities provide positive social and psychological environments for African American students that compare to those experienced by White students who attend White universities (Allen, 1992)”.

Research indicates that strong relationships with faculty are crucial to a student's academic success (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). Studies have shown, that although, this is true in many cases, African American students are often unable to form strong relationships with White faculty at predominantly White institutions (Flemming, 1985). One reason for this disconnect is that African American students perceive White faculty as culturally insensitive (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). Although many universities have educational tools in place to teach White faculty at PWIs, to be more culturally sensitive, there is much more to this problem that this solution can fix. African American students who attend HBCU's, feel that the faculty go above and beyond to ensure student success;

and at PWIs, African American students lack confidence in White faculties ability or desire to go above and beyond for their minority students.

### **Social Networking Sites in Higher Education**

Social network sites (SNS), or social media can be defined as web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and negotiate their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Ellison, 2007). These sites allow users to connect with others, and it is important to note that the definition mentions, sharing a connection. Most social media users share some sort of connection with their friends or followers on these sites. A connection can vary from being a classmate, same sex or race, or similar interests on different topics.

Using social media websites is one of the most common activities for today's college students. Any website that allows social interaction is considered a social media site, including sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). These sites allow people to connect or reconnect with friends, meet new people, and network with others thousands of miles away. Engaging in various forms of social media is a routine activity that research has shown to benefit its users by enhancing communication, social connection, and even technical skills (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). These sites allow people to express themselves in a manner that they might not feel comfortable doing in a face-to-face interaction.

It is because of these benefits, that social media has become increasingly visible in higher education settings as instructors look to technology to mediate and enhance their instruction as well as promote active learning for students (Tess, 2013).

## **Facebook**

Facebook is a social network site created 2004, allowing users to present themselves in an online profile, accumulate “friends” who can post comments on each other’s pages, and view each other’s profiles (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007).

Facebook users can also choose to join groups with others who share their common interests, see what classes they have in common, learn each other’s hobbies, musical interests, and relationship status through these profiles. Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2004) studied the social capital of college students on and offline. Social capital refers to the resources accumulated through the relationships among people.

## **Twitter**

Twitter is a social network site created in 2009 that serves as a micro blogging service form more than 230 million users. This social network site allows users to tweet about any topic within the 140-character limit and follow others to receive their tweets (Kwak, Haewoon, et al., 2010).

## **Instagram**

Instagram is a mobile app created in 2010 that enables users to turn mobile snapshots into visually appealing images, which are then shared with others on the network (Salomon, 2013). These images can also be shared on other social networks such as, Facebook and Twitter. Instagram is all about the mobile experience and popularity for this app grew with the adoption of smartphones with better cameras.

## **Impact of Technology**

African American perceptions of the media have proven to influence how society and African American’s view themselves. African Americans’ self-identity may be



shaped by the negative images they see and hear in their environment (Orekoya, 2014). Social network sites have the capability to connect users with others that are near or in the same geographical region. You can also use your location to find others near you.

African Americans are among the highest users of new media and Internet technology. Their usage of portable media devices, such as cell phones and tablets, outranks that of all other ethnicities in the United States (Nielsen, 2006). African Americans have shown to spend more hours using Internet and new media technology each day, using them for more personal use, rather than political use.

On a college campus, it takes little effort to connect with people who use the same social network sites as you. It is easy to see which students have the same interest, race, or major just by searching social media. African Americans on a college campus can use social media to relate to and meet others easily. The convenience of social media can make it easier for them to find likeminded individuals around their school, even though they may not see a high population in their classrooms.

The official social media pages at each university can be used to highlight accomplishments of students, inform, and promote. How a university uses its social media could potentially affect the experience of students. If minorities see their ethnicity being highlighted, it may provide them with a positive outlook on their university. If one is bombarded with the same image of Caucasians being represented on every platform, it can possibly increase perceptions of only Caucasians being “capable” or “worthy” of being represented in the media. Positive representation in the media may help reinforce to minorities that they are equal to their Caucasian counterparts.

## **Research Questions**

As discussed in the literature review above, few studies have been conducted about effective communication to African Americans and how it can be improved among African American college students with the use of social media. Social network sites allow for African Americans to connect with people dealing with similar situations without having a face-to-face interaction. Social media opens doors for the university to show how diverse its campus is. African Americans are among the highest group of people who most use social media in the United States (Nielsen, 2006). Smartphone penetration using social media apps, among African Americans is about 81 percent, edging the total population by seven percent (Nielsen, 2015). African Americans, on a monthly basis, spend close to 56 hours using mobile apps or Internet browsers. For these reasons, the researcher believes social media plays a major role in the lives of many African Americans. Thus, I suggest the first research question:

- RQ1: How often does the university use African Americans in their social media?

A second research question for this study seeks to identify if African Americans are being represented on campus.

- RQ2: Do African American students feel represented at Oklahoma State University?

Research suggests that several factors, such as role models and leaders on campus have helped increase student engagement and performance. Thus, we propose the final research question:

- RQ3: Do minorities feel that the universities communications efforts are effective?

A fourth research question for this study seeks to identify how Caucasians perceive the campus racial climate compared to African Americans.

- RQ4: Do Caucasians feel that African Americans are being fairly represented at Oklahoma State University?

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The objective of this research project was to demonstrate how Oklahoma State University use Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to communicate to and with its African American students effectively. This mixed method study implemented a quantitative survey to investigate the overall perceptions of OSU's social media content and how African Americans are represented. The survey sought to investigate both African American and Caucasian perspectives on how OSU uses their social media to effectively communicate to this minority students.

#### **Survey Research**

Quantitative research methods were employed to carry out this portion of the study. They were used to collect information regarding communication effectiveness, perceived African American frequencies of representation in university social media, and whether the media provided positive or negative images for African Americans. The subjects of this study involve 100 Oklahoma State University undergraduate students, ranging from the ages 18-26. Because of the nature of this study, a convenient sample proved to be the best method to investigate the perception of OSU's media usage, and provided much needed diversity to ensure results were not biased upon race. Providing a survey allowed the researcher to see if the perceptions found in the survey have a direct

correlation with what is actually found in the universities social media pages.

Included in the survey were two open ended questions that allowed respondents to answer questions based on their true perceptions and experiences. This also allowed respondents to give suggestions to the researcher to make communications efforts to minorities more effective. Because this is qualitative information, a qualitative, content analysis was conducted to find trends and commonalities in answers among the respondents.

Data regarding the survey were collected at various times. The instrument was emailed to randomly selected students, by an Institutional Research and Information Management analyst. These students attended Oklahoma State University and were between the ages of 18-26.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. Do you follow your universities, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, or any other form of social Media? Yes/No
2. Do you feel that your university represents your ethnicity through campus media? Yes/No
3. Do you feel like university communications officials care about African American students? Yes/No
4. Would seeing more stories about people who look similar to you effect your university experience? Yes/No
5. Do you feel that your race is represented in a positive light on your campus? Yes/No
6. How effective is their communication with your ethnic group? (Likert Scale)
7. Do you feel that communications officials in charge of social media understand the cultural background of different minority groups? Yes/No
8. How often do you see your race being represented through university social media? (Likert Scale)

9. Do you feel that your ethnicity is represented well on the universities website? Yes/No
10. Do you feel that the university media overuse Caucasians in its media? Yes/No
11. How effective is university communication with African Americans? (Likert Scale)
12. How often do you see African American students being portrayed negatively in university media? (Likert Scale)
13. How often do you see African American students being portrayed positively in university media? (Likert Scale)
14. Are African American students represented often in the universities social media? Yes/No
15. Do the university communication efforts increase your likeliness to continue at this university? (Likert Scale)
16. How important is the inclusion or representation of African Americans in university media to you? (Likert Scale)
17. Do the university communication efforts provide you with a more positive experience on campus? Yes/No
18. Do you feel like university communications officials listen to African American students? Yes/No
19. Do you feel like African Americans are underrepresented in university media? Yes/No
20. Did you come to this university based on how they communicate on social media? Yes/No
21. What can communications representatives do to ensure minorities are represented positively while avoiding stereotypes? (Open Ended)
22. What do you think the university could do to be more inclusive? (Open Ended)

## **Sample**

The sample included African American and Caucasian students who attend Oklahoma State University. This sample was chosen based on where I attended school, which ultimately provided me with more resources to conduct research. OSU was also

chosen because it is currently one of the schools in the Big 12 Conference with one of the largest African American populations (Forbes, 2016). The research targeted minorities ranging from 18-26 years old.

To effectively conduct survey research, the researcher sought out 100 participants through a convenience sample from Oklahoma State University, 50 African American and 50 Caucasian responses. This was necessary so that the researcher could compare experiences from both groups. The goal of this research was to try and ensure that there is some level of anonymity in the study.

### **Instrument**

A 25-question survey was administered to subjects discussing communication effectiveness, representation, and marginalization on campus. To conduct this research, the researcher used a Likert-type scale (7=Strongly Agree; 1=Strongly Disagree). Examples of these survey questions include but are not limited to (a) “My college media impacted my decision to attend”; (b) “I feel represented on my college campus”; and (c) “I believe that my university effectively communicates with my race.”

I made certain that I followed the sample, and that the survey participants were within the set race categories ranging from ages 18-26. To ensure that the participants meet the demographic criteria, the researcher included demographic filter questions at the beginning of the survey. If the participants don't meet the criteria, the researcher did not use the data obtained in that survey. A consent statement at the beginning of the survey, solidifying that participation in the survey assumes consent to use the given information was included as well. If the participants did not give their consent to use the information

given for research, then I did not use the data collected. The last page included a statement thanking the participants for their completion of the survey. By following this survey method, my chances of collecting data consistent with my research objectives increased.

## **Procedures**

This survey requires the use of human subjects, so the researcher had to receive approval from the IRB committee. Prior to conducting research, submitted were information that was included in emails, the survey and consent form. After receiving Institutional Review Board approval for research, the researcher emailed the Institutional Research and Information Management office to request an email list based on the specified demographics. The email included a copy of the IRB approval, information about the research being conducted, and requested an email list of 500 undergraduate students at Oklahoma State University. The second email was sent to the respondents provided by the communications personnel, with the link to the survey to eligible participants. Two weeks after the link was sent out, a reminder email was sent about the survey was sent, encouraging those who had not participated to do so. The researcher considered a Web-based survey because it is convenient, and allowed students to complete the survey via smartphone or on their computers. The survey requested the consent of the participant with a consent form. The consent form should read as followed:

Thank you for your participation in our survey research for communication effectiveness to minorities at predominantly White universities. Your responses will allow researchers to observe how effective communication to minorities,



between the ages of 18-26, are on these campuses. Please take time to read the statement below and check the box indicating your consent to use your responses for the purpose of research. “I understand that my responses to this survey will be reviewed and analyzed for research. I give the researchers permission to use this information for the purpose of effective communication among African Americans at predominantly White universities.”

### **Data Analysis**

Using benchmarking, trending and comparative data methods, the trends and commonalities were analyzed in the research findings. This will allow future researchers to analyze changes over the years if they wish to continue this study.

Using the survey research and features on the SurveyMonkey platform, the researcher was able to compare and contrast African American responses to Caucasians, providing a comparison of perceptions from the minority and majority group.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Reliability was established by seeing if survey responses can be generalized to the population of items. Researchers reviewed data to find commonalities among the responses given.

## **Content Analysis**

A quantitative content analysis was chosen to investigate how OSU utilizes Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and the frequencies of African Americans present. It must be noted that there is deviation that exists when identifying race. For example, a group of Caucasians could be counted, and it is possible that some of the students were Native American, or mixed race. This deviation should be considered across all races. Wright (1986) defined content analysis as “a research technique for the systematic classification and description of communication content according to certain usually predetermined categories (p.125).” A content analysis was used in this study because it is an ideal way to measure media messages, although it may not provide the same strengths as other research tactics. Semantics can get lost in translation when posting on the internet, so by utilizing a content analysis with set definitions, the researcher was able to objectively examine OSU’s Facebook, Twitter and Instagram content. Using a media usage and gratification scale, I was also able to determine if either race was represented positively in each post mentioned.

This quantitative content analysis measured frequencies and other descriptive statistics that weighed on how often African Americans were visible on the university’s social media pages and whether their representation was positive or negative. The qualitative aspect of this content analysis was used to help find meaning out of the quantitative findings. It went beyond the figures and provided examples of how OSU used Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to communicate with students. The qualitative

content analysis helped identify common themes that surfaced from the data and to highlight actual social media messages released by OSU.

### **Sample**

Archives, from OSU's communications department included 1,307 photo images and 74 videos, collected on March 30, 2017. This method of collection was chosen, because these images and videos were approved, and verified by the department. Receiving archives straight from the source, increases the validity in this analysis. (n=2,012) Facebook posts, (n=5,723) Twitter posts, and 669 Instagram posts, (n=585) photos, and (n=84) videos were included in this study.

### **Procedures**

To perform the content analysis, the Oklahoma State University news and information department was contacted to request archives for previous social media posts from Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The department provided the researcher with links to private archives used by the university for social media images and textual content. Every file was separated by year, and then a separate folder was provided for each month. Every photo and post was analyzed separately and marked using the coding sheet provided below.

This method was used for every piece of content being analyzed. Because the content analysis did not involve human subjects, IRB approval was not necessary. Although, it was not required to be approved by the IRB, it was mentioned in the application.

In this portion of the research, two female coders were used, one African American and one Caucasian. Two coders were needed to determine if there was interrater or intercoder reliability present. Reliability can be defined as the extent of replicability, which is pursuing the same results through repeated measuring procedures (Neundorf, 2002). This reliability is interpreted by the extent of agreement between coders. The first coder, an African American female, examined all the archived photo images and videos (n=1,381). To determine if intercoder reliability was present, a second coder, a Caucasian female, analyzed 10% of the total images and videos (n=138). The second coder, was trained by the researcher, and given a clear set of definitions and a coder sheet with descriptions on how to analyze photos, then left alone to analyze the content. After the second coder finished analyzing the photos, the coding sheets were placed scanned for similarities in coding. If the coding scale matched for each coder, one point was marked, if they did not match, the code was not counted. The researcher confirmed that intercoder reliability would be present, if the two coders reached a percentage agreement of 85%.

In order to determine how effective, the communication tactics of social media were effective, the researcher had to analyze content from each of the universities' verified social media accounts. Upon request, OSU's communication department provided me with archive images used on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram along with their corresponding textual content, starting from February 1, 2015 and ending in February 1, 2017. The researcher wanted to analyze the frequencies of African Americans used on the social media outlets. To analyze the content the following coding to keep track of the images and textual content that the coders encountered:

- ◆ P: Represented race was mentioned in a positive way
- ◆ N: Represented race was mentioned in a negative way
- ◆ I: Represented race was neutral impartial, neither positive nor negative
- ◆ S: Represented race was mentioned because of sports
- ◆ NMF: African American was seen in the picture, but not the main focus
- ◆ W: Caucasian person was mentioned
- ◆ HOSU: Student was featured in “Humans of OSU”

These definitions and representations were used interchangeably. For example, there was a picture of an African American along with two Caucasian students playing the violin. In the photo the African American man, is seen in a positive image, but not the main focus of the photo, thus for labeling purposes, I used 2W women 1A man P NMF. I continued to use this identification method for all images and messages seen during my investigation.

For this portion of research, one African American female, and one Caucasian female coder was used to code the images presented. Two coders were needed to see if intercoder reliability was present. The photos and videos were first analyzed to determine if it was a positive, neutral, or negative. Once coded, every individual visible in the content were then coded by race. After independent evaluation of every image and video, data was compiled and tallied to assess the frequency of the races being represented.

## **Data Analysis**

Using benchmarking, trending and comparative data methods, the trends and commonalities were analyzed in the research findings. This will allow future researchers to analyze changes over the years if they wish to continue this study.

Using a usage and gratification scale, the researcher analyzed social media posts that were university approved on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Of these posts from the years of February 1, 2015 through February 1, 2017, the researcher compared and analyzed the frequency of African American representation to Caucasian individuals. The researcher determined, based on a previously set scale, if the posts were of positive or negative mention. This helped the researcher understand if African American perceptions from the survey are consistent with their representation in reality.

## **Validity and Reliability**

To establish intercoder reliability, more than one coder was used to code the same images independently. To determine if intercoder reliability was present, the researcher set a margin of 85% for the extent of agreement between the coders.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

This chapter is devoted to a presentation of the results of the study which were obtained by analyzing the data in the way described in the preceding chapter. The findings concerning African American inclusion and representation in the media are presented in four sections based on the proposed research questions. 500 undergraduate students attending Oklahoma State University, ranging from the ages of 18-26, were asked to participate in this study. No problems were encountered concerning the students' questionnaires return. However, out of 500 student questionnaires, 97 were returned, and 75 were valid and complete.

The survey was distributed through the SurveyMonkey platform, available to respondents from March 27, 2017 to April 10, 2017.

#### **Sample Characteristics**

Of the 75 survey respondents who reported their race, (42.7%,) thirty identified as Black or African-American. This is the group that constitutes the focus of this study. Within this sample, the largest concentration of respondents were White or Caucasian (49.3%, n=37), followed by much smaller numbers of individuals of mixed races,

Hispanic (4%, n=3), American Indian/ Alaskan Native (2.7%, n=1), and Asian (1.3%, n=1). The average age of respondents was between the ages of 18 and 20 (53.3%, n=40). The majority of the sample were females (66.7%, n=48), and more than half of them (65.3%, n=49) had some college but no degree. In addition, all of the respondents (100%, n=75) attended a predominantly White undergraduate school, Oklahoma State University.

**Table 1**  
*Demographics*

<b>Gender (N=75)</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Male	27	33.3%
Female	48	66.7%
<b>Age (N=75)</b>		
18-20	40	53.3%
21-26	35	46.7%
<b>Race (N=75)</b>		
White or Caucasian	37	49.3%
Black or African-American	30	42.7%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	2	2.7%
Asian	1	1.3%
Hispanic	1	1.3%
Multiple Races	2	2.7%
<b>Highest Level of School Completed (N=75)</b>		
High school degree or equivalent (e.g. GED)	10	13.3%
Some college but no degree	49	65.3%
Associate degree	5	6.7%
Bachelor degree	9	12.0%
Graduate degree	2	2.7%



## **RQ1. Frequencies of African Americans Featured in University Media**

Using social media outlets to reach the public has been a growing trend that several individuals, corporations or institutions have adopted. These platforms allow these institutions to communicate to mass audiences and individuals who interact with their pages. It is important to study how Oklahoma State University uses these pages as a tool of reaching minorities, increasing inclusion and improving the university experience. This section begins by presenting general data from OSU's Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts, as they relate to the research questions. Qualitative data helped make meaning of the quantitative data in this section.

The number of people that OSU follow ("following"), the number of people who follow OSU ("followers"), ranges across each social media outlet. As of April 1, 2017 OSU's Facebook, has the largest number of followers (n=187,580). With this being a verified page, users can "like" or "follow" this Facebook account, but the page does not disclose how many people OSU is following back. Twitter, (@okstate) is listed as the social media platform that has the second highest amount of followers (n=57,000); and also follows the most people back (n=11,100). Lastly, Instagram (@okstateu) has the lowest number of followers (n=35,300) and follows the least amount of people (n=2,964). OSU uses these social media sites interchangeably, often displaying the same message and image across the three platforms.

Twitter was used the most out of all social media between February 1, 2015 through February 1, 2017. During this time period (n=5,723) tweets were dispersed, with (n=1,213) of these tweets being plain text. (n=3,708) of the tweets included links to other

university social media pages and articles, while (n=802) tweets included links with photos.

**Table 2**  
*Breakdown of Social Media Outlet*

<b>Facebook</b>	<b>N</b>
Followers	187, 591
Following	*
<b>Twitter</b>	
Followers	57, 500
Following	11, 100
<b>Instagram</b>	
Followers	35, 300
Following	2, 964

\*Facebook does not disclose how many people a user is following.

**Table 3**  
*Examined Content from Twitter*

<b>Twitter</b>	<b>N</b>
Tweets with plain text	1, 213
Tweets with links to stories and other social media outlets	3, 708
Tweets with links to photos	802
<b>Total Number of Tweets</b>	<b>5, 723</b>

Facebook was the next most frequently used social media outlet. During this time frame, communications officials dispersed (n=708) photos, (n=177) videos, and (n=2, 012) text posts. Lastly, Instagram was used the least, with communicators posting (n=585) photos, and (n=84) videos. It is important to mention, that several videos and images were repeated through each social media outlet, and weren't counted more than once during this study.

**Table 4**  
*Examined Content from Facebook & Instagram*

<b>Facebook</b>	<b>N</b>
Posts with plain text	2, 012
Photos	708
Videos	177
<b>Total number of Facebook Posts</b>	<b>2, 897</b>
<b>Instagram</b>	
Photos	585
Videos	84
<b>Total Number of Instagram Posts</b>	<b>669</b>

Frequency of African Americans featured in the university media was investigated in this content analysis. Analyzed were images (n=1,307) and videos (n=74), that were examined for the number of African Americans and Caucasians in each photo, perception of positive, negative or neutral views, photos that mentioned these races because of sports, and the amount of times African Americans were mentioned but not the main focus of the image. The total number of students (n=1,934) counted in this study, is important to understand the differences in minority representation compared to Caucasian students. OSU has a social media initiative called “Humans of OSU,” were they showcase different students along with their backgrounds and current accomplishments on campus. Humans of OSU were also counted to see the frequency of African Americans being showcased by themselves.

Of these images, Caucasians were visible in OSU’s social media the most frequent (85.6%, n=1,656). Of those being featured, women (50.50%, n=836) were mentioned more frequently than men (48.7%, n=807). Some of this images posted on

these social media outlets included Caucasian children (0.8%, n=13). The majority of Caucasians being represented in images and videos were positive (95.6%, n=1,583), while (4.4%, n=73) were neutral in photos, providing neither a positive or negative image. There were no negative images present during this time period.

OSU is a member of the Big 12 athletic conference, so posting and updating followers and fans about sports is not uncommon. Of these images (85.6%, n=1,656), Caucasians were mentioned in sports posts (2.4%, n=40).

Caucasians were featured more times than any other group (77.8%, n=21), within this time frame for the “Humans of OSU,” recognition.

**Table 5**  
*Ethnicity Representation in the Media*

	<b>N</b>	<b>% Represented in Photos</b>	<b>% Represented on Campus</b>
<b>Caucasian</b>		<b>85.6%</b>	<b>70.7%</b>
<b>Men</b>	<b>807</b>	<b>48.7%</b>	
<b>Women</b>	<b>836</b>	<b>50.5%</b>	
<b>Children</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>0.8%</b>	
Positive Images	1,583	95.6%	
Neutral Images	73	4.4%	
Negative Images	0		
Sports Images	40	2.4%	
<b>Total # of Caucasians Represented in School Media</b>	<b>1,656</b>		

Of the total number of students documented in this study (n=1, 934), African American students were mentioned less than one-fourth of the time (11.4%, n=220). Of those African Americans being represented, men (48.7%, n=118,) were present more than women (50.5%, n=93). Of those being represented in images and videos, (0.5%, n=1)

were mentioned neutrally and (0.5%, n=1) were mentioned in a negative light. There were several visible or present in photos, but did not serve as the focus of the picture (23.6%, n=52). In these cases, African Americans may have been seen or blurred in the background, but still visible. Of the total amount of African Americans represented in the media (11.4%, n=220), less than half (28.6%, n=63) were represented without the presence of a Caucasian person. This means that of the African American people being represented, they were three times more likely to be represented with a Caucasian individual or group present. African Americans mentioned in sports were more frequent than Caucasians in this category (19.1%, n= 42). This indicates that African Americans are represented in the media as athletes, almost five times more than Caucasians.

**Table 6**

*Ethnicity Representation in the Media*

	N	% Represented in Photos	% Represented on Campus
<b>African American</b>		<b>11.4%</b>	<b>4.8%</b>
<b>Men</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>48.7%</b>	
<b>Women</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>50.5%</b>	
<b>Children</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0.8%</b>	
Positive Images	218	99.1%	
Neutral Images	1	0.5%	
Negative Images	1	0.5%	
Sports Images	42	19.1%	
Featured in photos but were not main focus	52	23.6%	
Photos without Caucasians present	63	28.6%	
<b>Total # of African American Represented in School Media</b>	<b>220</b>		

With African Americans representing 4.8% of OSU's population, having 11.4% representation in the social media, signifies that African Americans are actually overrepresented in the university's media.

Of the total amount of features from "Humans of OSU," (n=27), African Americans were only represented once (3.7%, n=1).

Although, they were not the focus of this study, other races were counted and identified in this analysis. With a small number of other races being represented, (n=58) the total amount of people being counted (n=1, 934), Asians (2%, n=36), Hispanics (5.5%, n=11) and Native Americans (5.5%, n=11) were mentioned. Of these groups (18.5%) five individuals were featured as a Human of OSU. While Asians only make up 1.6% of OSU's population, research shows that they are slightly overrepresented in the media.

Likewise, Mexican/ Hispanic and American Indian/Alaskan are extremely underrepresented. With both representing more than 5% of the population, each ethnicity is being underrepresented almost 12 times more than other races.

**Table 7**  
*Ethnicity Representation in the Media*

	N	% Represented in Photos	% Represented on Campus
Asians	36	2.00%	1.6%
Mexican/ Hispanics	11	0.60%	5.5%
American Indian or Alaskan	11	0.60%	5.2%

**Table 8***Frequency of Representation in "Humans of OSU"*

	<b>N</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Caucasians	21	77.80%
African American	1	3.70%
Mexican/ Hispanic	3	11.10%
American Indian or Alaskan	2	7.40%
Asians	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	

### **Intercoder Reliability**

In this research, one African American female examined 1,307 photo images and 74 videos. To determine intercoder reliability, one-tenth (10%, n=138) of the total images were examined by a second coder, a Caucasian female. Intercoder reliability was measured based on the level of agreement for each photo. After comparing coding sheets between each coder, the researcher determined that intercoder reliability was present. Of the photos being compared, (n=138) the clear majority of image coding were the same (87%, n=120.1). Because the extent of agreement was more than the 85% margin set by the researcher, intercoder reliability was present.

### **RQ2. African American Perceptions on Campus Racial Climate, Representation, & Inclusion**

The perception that African Americans have on representation at Oklahoma State University was the second proposed question of research. The survey research was filtered to only show responses from African American respondents. Based on the survey research, nearly half (46.4%, n=13) of African American students are aware of and

follow Oklahoma State University on Facebook, 79.3% follow the university on Twitter (@okstate), and 68.9% follow the university on Instagram (@okstateu).

Of these African American respondents, a large majority (66.7%, n=20) did not feel that OSU represents African Americans through campus media. An inherently smaller percentage (33.3%, n=10) reported that they *occasionally* or *rarely* saw their race being represented in the media.

Similarly, a large percentage (63.3%, n=19) did not feel that university communications officials care about them, while less than half (36.7%, n=11) did. An increasingly higher percentage (83.3%, n=25) recorded that seeing more stories about people who look similar to them would affect their university experience. A slightly smaller percentage (53.3%, n=16) of African Americans do not feel that their race is represented in a positive light on campus. With more than half (73.3%, n=22) of them reporting feeling underrepresented on the universities social media and website. A large portion of these respondents, (70%, n=21) do not feel like university communications officials listen to African American students, while only (30%, n=9), felt that they did.

Nearly four-fifths of African American respondents (80%, n=24) reported that they did not believe that communications officials in charge of social media understood the cultural background of minority groups. There is a very high percentage of African American respondents that did not feel that they were represented well in the media, (73.3%, n=22).

Similarly, a large portion of African American respondents (80%, n=24) felt that Caucasians were used too often in university media. Consistent with data thus far, 73.3% of African American respondents reported that they do not see African Americans in the



OSU's media often. Likewise, a large amount of African American respondents (83.3%, n=25) feel underrepresented in the university media.

A small margin, (30%, n= 9) recorded that they *occasionally* saw African Americans being portrayed negatively in university media, with a close following (26.7%, n=8) reporting that they *rarely* or *never* saw African Americans being portrayed negatively. Less than half, (40%, n=12) of the respondents reported that they *rarely* saw African Americans being portrayed positively in the media, with a close following (36.7%, n=11) of respondents reporting that they *occasionally* see these images.

A large percentage of the sample (63.3%, n= 19) of African American respondents recorded that it was *very important* that African Americans be included or represented in university media.

Half of these respondents, (50%, n=15) reported that the communications efforts towards African Americans provided them with a positive experience on campus, while the other half, (50%, n=15) did not.

### **RQ3. Perceptions of Communications Effectiveness Among African American Students**

Less than half of the African American respondents (36.7%, n=11) on OSU's campus reported that the university's general communications efforts were *somewhat effective*, closely followed by (23.3%, n=7) saying they were *effective*. A small portion (16.7%, n=5) of the respondents recorded that communications efforts were *ineffective*.

About one-third (33.3%, n=10) of respondents viewed universities communication with African American students as *somewhat effective*, while (23.3%, n=7) viewed their efforts as *moderately effective* or *ineffective*. Only a small margin,

(16.7%, n=5) of respondents felt that communication efforts with African Americans were *effective*.

Communications efforts made by the university is important to the African American respondents, but it does not appear to affect their likelihood of continuing or discontinuing their studies at OSU. Half (50%, n=15) of these respondents were *neutral* on the topic, while only (20%, n=6) were “likely” to allow the communication efforts effect their likeliness to continue at OSU.

Finally, students were asked if they chose to attend OSU based on how they communicate on social media, and the results among African American respondents were almost unanimous, with (93.3%, n=28) of respondents recording that they did not choose OSU based on its social media content, while (6.7%, n=2) recorded that they did choose OSU based on its social media content.

The final questions of the survey were free response questions that allowed the respondent to answer the question based on their true perceptions, feelings and personal experiences. With this, information, a qualitative content analysis was performed to find similarities and common trends among the data. The following questions were asked:

- What can communications representatives do to ensure minorities are represented positively while avoiding stereotypes?
- What do you think the university could do to be more inclusive?

For question one, themes such as “minority group leaders,” “minority representatives” and “minority organizations” were common key words used in responses. Suggestions such as “meeting with minority leaders,” “increasing diversity among communication staff,” “attending minority events,” and “acknowledging minority

accomplishments often,” were common suggestions to ensure minorities were represented positively while avoiding stereotypes.

For question two, “representation,” “events,” “inclusive” and “understanding were common themes found in answers to increase minority inclusiveness in university media. Some common themes found in these answers among African American respondents included, “publicizing African American events with the same magnitude they do for White students,” “providing events that are welcoming to all students, rather than just White students,” “meet with minority leaders,” and “hire more minorities in the communication department.”

#### **RQ4. Caucasian Perceptions on African American Representation**

This section will be used to analyze the data that correlates with the proposed, fourth research question. This question sought to explore the perceptions of Caucasian students have regarding the representation and inclusion of African American students, compared to this minority group.

The majority of Caucasian respondents (71.4%, n=25) identified themselves as female. Of these Caucasians respondents (100%, n=35) of them felt that communications officials cared about African American students, compared to the (63.3%, n=19) of African American respondents that did not feel that communications officials did.

Similarly, a large portion these respondents (91.2%, n=31) felt that their race, White, was represented in a positive light, while only (46.7%, n=14) of African Americans felt that they were being represented positively.

More than half of these respondents (68.6%, n=24) felt that university officials in charge of social media understand the cultural background of different minority groups,

while a large margin of African American respondents (80%, n=24) felt that communications officials do not understand minority cultural backgrounds.

Almost half of Caucasian respondents (43%, n=15) reported that they *very frequently* see their race being represented through university social media while of (33.3%, n=10) African American respondents reported that they only *occasionally* or *rarely* see their race being represented. (94.3%, n=33) of Caucasian respondents feel that their ethnicity is represented well on the universities website, with a large percentage (73.3%, n=22) of African American respondents reporting that they do not feel represented well on the universities website.

By contrast, more than half, (63%, n=22) of these respondents do not feel that the university media overuse Caucasians in its media. The opposite was reported from African American respondents, with the vast majority (80%, n=24) feeling that the university overuses Caucasians in its media. Slightly more than half of these respondents (54.3%, n=19) do not feel that African Americans are underrepresented in university media. Consistent with data thus far, (83.3%, n=25) of African Americans respondents felt that their race was underrepresented in university media.

A smaller percentage of Caucasian respondents (38.2%, n=13) reported that they believe that the communication efforts towards African Americans was *effective* and 0% reporting that they felt it was *ineffective*. (33.3%, n=10) of African American respondents felt that university communication to their race was *somewhat effective*, and (23.3%, n=7) of respondents feeling that it was *moderately effective* or *ineffective*. (45.7%, n=16) of these same respondents reported that they *never* see African American students being portrayed negatively in university media, and see African Americans portrayed positively

*very frequently*. On the contrary, African American respondents reported that they *occasionally* see negative portrayals in the media (36.7%, n=11), and *rarely* see African Americans being portrayed positively in the media (40%, n=12). More than half, (65.7%, n=23) of Caucasian respondents recorded that African Americans are represented in the universities social media. While the opposite was reported with African American respondents, (73.3%, n=22) reporting that they do not feel that African American students are represented often in the universities social media.

The inclusion and representation of African Americans in university media is *important* to (34.3%, n=12). Almost doubled, (63.3%, n=19) of African American respondents feel that inclusion or representation of African Americans in university media was *very important*. The vast majority of these respondents (91.4%, n=32) recorded that they felt like university communications officials listen to African American students, while (70%, n=21) of African American respondents do not feel that the communications officials listen to African American students.

## CHAPTER V

## CONCLUSION

### **Discussion**

Social media pages are assumed to promote the individual, corporation or institution they represent in a positive light. Social networking sites and their use for professional businesses and institutions has increased overtime, making it uncommon for organizations not to be present on these outlets.

Oklahoma State University has accounts set on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Foursquare and LinkedIn, for several organizations and entities within the university. Only the verified, official OSU accounts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram were used in this study, because they are some of the most commonly used media outlets among college students. Social networks are both pervasive and powerful. They are an effective means of connection, one that college students use extensively (Knight et al., 2016).

Results of this study indicate that, African Americans on OSU's campus do not feel like they are properly represented at OSU through its media. Based on content analysis frequency data, we are able to see that African Americans are actually overrepresented in the media, given their numbers in the population on campus. African Americans reported that they occasionally or rarely see their ethnicity being

represented in the media, and that is understandable as they are only 11.4% of the total images and videos being analyzed contained African Americans.

With the majority of African Americans feeling that the university does not promote images of their ethnicity in a positive light, it is possible that this is a direct effect of frequency. African Americans may be conditioned to feel this way, not because they are not being equitably represented, but the amount of times these images come about. Of the 1,934 images and videos, African Americans were mentioned less than one-tenth of the time (11.4%, n=220). Research has also disproved this, as (99.1%, n=218) of the images and videos that featured African Americans were positive. The lack of representation, could potentially place a negative stigma in the mind of African Americans. The thought of not being represented is negative, so when African Americans do see their ethnicity being represented, they may be naturally conditioned to look for negativity in the images.

The mindset of African Americans is also important to mention. Students can also look at these images with a “meeting the quota” mindset. Suggesting that the university may “sprinkle” in African Americans in its media occasionally to cover its bases. However they are in social media five times more often than seen on campus. As this is the mindset of several African Americans, it is possible that they could look at a positive image, and have a negative viewpoint because they do not believe it’s because the university wants to represent them, but rather that it has to.

African Americans also mentioned that they did not feel heard by the university communications officials. This is may be a reason why these students feel like university communications efforts are moderately effective and ineffective. Communication

between administrators and African American students could theoretically be strained. University officials may not fully understand what African Americans want to see, and the lack of understanding leads to frustration among students.

With a stereotype or stigma, that African Americans are great athletes, it is no surprise that almost (20%) of the total frequency of African Americans being mentioned were sports features. African Americans were represented in relation to sports at a rate of almost five times more than Caucasians in OSU's media.

African Americans, although considered overrepresented based on research, were rarely pictured alone in the media. Most photos that African Americans were represented in, included Caucasians or members of other ethnicities. This could add to the feeling of underrepresentation, because African Americans are rarely showcased alone in as Caucasians are in the university social media. Of the 27 individuals being represented in the "Human of OSU" social media segment during this time period, one was African American, and 21 were Caucasian. The remaining five were represented by Hispanics and Native Indian/ Indigenous students. Being mentioned or represented in sports is common, but highlighting African Americans outside of this realm is as necessary as it is for Caucasian students.

The underrepresentation of other minorities was a monumental finding in this study. It is important to note the deviation present when coding ethnicity. There is potential that some of these ethnicities were miscoded, and could be inaccurately coded based on the researcher's perceptions. With American Indian/ Alaskan Native and Mexican/ Hispanics combined, they represent more than 10 percent of OSU's student population. Of the examined images and videos, these groups were represented at less



than 1%. These groups, individually have more students on OSU's campus, but are represented at a rate that is more than 12 percent lower than African Americans. This is could potentially come from not voicing their opinions as much as African Americans. When these minority groups are represented, it is less likely to be a college student enjoying campus life, but the promotion of their cultural events around campus. These students are rarely seen or represented as the "typical" college student, but are showcased in ways that connect them to their culture such as culturally enriched clothing and food.

Several racially charged incidents have occurred at OSU involving African Americans. This led to various protests, meetings with school administrators, students condemning OSU on social media, media outbreaks and backlash from alumni, all being led by African American leaders. It is possible that communications officials underrepresent these minority groups, not purposefully, but because they do not emphasize the importance of them being represented or included on campus. African Americans are still not represented at a rate that it is satisfying to them, but the research has shown that they are over-represented. Although, it is not the job of the student to ensure that the university represents their ethnicity in the media, it is worth mentioning that it is possible that it's because they do not "demand" it. The university may be more prone to represent the group if it became an issue.

The comparison in beliefs between Caucasians and African Americans was also an important factor for this study. All of the Caucasian respondents felt that university communications officials cared about African American students. One must note that there is a potential degree of over optimism because the majority of these respondents are

Caucasian women. More than half of African Americans did not feel as university officials cared about them, and this could be a direct issue resulting from the strained communication, such as the aforementioned racial incidents.

Caucasians did not feel that they were overrepresented in the media, but were mentioned in media content 15 percent more than their actual representation on campus. The vast majority of African Americans felt that Caucasians were overrepresented, and this true, as they were 1, 656 of the total people mentioned (85.6%, n=1, 934).

Caucasians felt that university communicators understood the cultural background of minorities and that their communication efforts were effective. This sense of optimism could be a direct reflection of personal experiences. Many of these respondents may not understand what it feels like to have their culture be questioned or misrepresented, because they are present in positive images at OSU almost 100 percent of the time. Because they feel that their ethnicity is being represented in a positive light, they may overgeneralize and assume that all ethnicities are being represented and in a positive manner.

To increase the validity of the content analysis utilized in this study, two female coders were used, one African American and one Caucasian. This helps decrease the possibility of racial bias in the study. Providing two perceptions, from two different ethnicities gives the study perspective of the findings, while diminishing some of the deviation present when coding ethnicities. With 87% intercoder reliability or extent of agreeance, one can see that the coders saw similar representation patterns in the analyzed content.

Research has shown that African American students at predominantly White institutions are negatively affected by the stereotype threat. This threat is a predicament in which students feel themselves to be at risk of conforming to stereotypes about their social group. In this case, African Americans, feel underrepresented in the media and this could add to the stereotype threat in many instances. Representation of African American students in the universities social media could potentially alleviate the feeling of the stereotype threat on campus. African American students seeing their race being represented outside of the sports realm, and in a classroom setting, will help negate the stereotype that most African Americans attend college on a sports scholarship.

Individuals experience the stereotype threat in instances where they are numerically the minority. On predominantly White campuses, the stereotype threat is heightened for African Americans, as well as other minority groups. Representation in a positive light will allow others to see these minority groups in ways they might have never experienced, potentially leading to a changed perception of these individuals. This not only effects the majority, but representation could lead to a sense of acceptance on their campus that is not always there when the threat is present.

Through this study, the researcher added to the growing body of knowledge by providing several perspectives of African American experiences with university media, while potentially providing communications officials with different approaches to communicate with African Americans more effectively.

### **Limitations**

With every research study, there are drawbacks or limitations of the study. For this study in particular, the first major limitation was the sample size. With only 75

completed surveys returned, the research was not representative of the entire campus. This study was tailored to Oklahoma State University, so it cannot be completely replicated in all aspects on other collegiate campuses. Researchers would have to tailor their research to the campuses they examine, if they so choose to perform this study.

It is important to note that there is also a certain level of deviation present and it can be quite difficult to code race and ethnicities. Only examining the pictures, it is sometimes virtually impossible to determine someone's actual race by mere examination of an image. Having more than two female coders to examine images in videos could have alleviated some of this deviation, and could address this limitation. With both coders being female, there could have been potential bias in the study. Adding a male Caucasian coder to the study, will allow the researcher to compare and combine results for a more compelling content analysis. Male coders could be added to the study, as they would bring a different outlook and perspective of those being represented in the media content.

## **Recommendations**

As this research sought to examine the content of Oklahoma State University's social media pages, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram for frequencies of African Americans, while examining perceived communications effectiveness, this research has provided alarming insights beyond the proposed research questions. Although, African Americans perceive that they are underrepresented, during the period of February 1, 2015 through February 1, 2017, they were numerically overrepresented. There is a clear disconnect between students and communications officials. But, at even more alarming

numbers, there are other minority groups that are being represented less than African Americans. In the research, several students recorded that university officials should reach out to African American group leaders to bridge the gap, with inclusion and effective communication at the forefront. The researcher believes that administrators should take this tactic and implement these ideals towards the minorities that were represented at 0.6 percent, Mexicans/ Hispanics and American Indian/ Alaskan Native. These groups individually have more students than African Americans, but it is not shown in the media. Combined they represent more than 10 percent of the universities population, and their percentages represented in the media is not even close to half of that number.

Inclusion and representation is important and the diversity of the campus should be reflected in its media. I would also suggest that the university not only mention these groups when they have culturally charged events, but as your everyday students on campus as well. Presenting their culture is not the issue, but only mentioning these marginalized groups when they have a cultural event or selling their native foods, is not the only time these students should be mentioned. The same is recommended for showcasing African American students as well. They are represented in sports posts most of the time, which carries the stereotype, that they are only on these campuses because of athletic scholarships. African Americans are rarely showcased without Caucasians present. Representing these students alone in the media, with academic mention is necessary to decrease common racial stereotypes.

The university should also promote all events that minorities host with the same vigor they do Caucasians. Promoting these events could potentially spark the eyes of several culture and increase the cultural understanding of students who attend.

Lastly, the researcher believes that the university should hire more minorities in its news and information department. Research has shown that diverse groups typically make better and more conscious decisions than homogenous groups. Even when universities want to diversify, it often times does not have the diversity in leadership to help make decisions in an effective manner. Not just hiring African American communicators, but those who are Asian, Hispanic/Mexican, and American Indian/Alaskan Native. Diversifying the decision makers, will make for a more diverse media messages.

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## APPENDICES

## Welcome

Thank you for participating in this study. The purpose of this research study is to determine how university social media effects minority students. Your participation in this research is voluntary. There is no penalty for refusal to participate, and you are free to withdraw your consent and participation in this project at any time. The survey takes about 10-15 minutes to complete. Please click NEXT if you choose to participate. By clicking NEXT, you are indicating that you freely and voluntarily agree to participate in this study and you also acknowledge that you are at least 18 years of age.

If you have questions about your rights as a research volunteer, you may contact the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair, Dr. Hugh Crethar at 223 Scott Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078, 405-744-3377 or [irb@okstate.edu](mailto:irb@okstate.edu). If you have any questions about the study, please contact Stanza Y. Patterson at [stanzza.patterson@okstate.edu](mailto:stanzza.patterson@okstate.edu).

\* 1. Do you follow your universities Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, or any other form of social media?

	Yes	No
Instagram	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Twitter	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Facebook	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

\* 2. Do you feel that your university represents your ethnicity through campus media?

☐ Yes  
☐ No

\* 3. Do you feel like university communications officials care about African American students?

\* 4. Would seeing more stories about people who look similar to you effect your university experience?

\* 5. Do you feel that your race is represented in a positive light on your campus?

\* 6. How effective is their communication with your ethnicity group?

	Very Effective	Effective	Moderately Effective	Somewhat Effective	Ineffective
Effectiveness	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

\* 7. Do you feel that communications officials in charge of social media understand the cultural background of different minority groups?

- ☐ Yes  
☐ No

\* 8. How often do you see your race being represented through university social media?

	Always	Very Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Very Rarely	Never
Frequency	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

\* 9. Do you feel that your ethnicity is represented well on the universities website?

- ☐ Yes  
☐ No

\* 10. Do you feel that the university media overuse Caucasians in its media?

- ☐ Yes  
☐ No

11. How effective is university communication with African Americans?

- ☐ Very Effective
- ☐ Effective
- ☐ Moderately Effective
- ☐ Somewhat Effective
- ☐ Ineffective

12. How often do you see African American students being portrayed negatively in university media?

	Always	Very Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Very Rarely	Never
Frequency	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

13. How often do you see African American students being portrayed positively in university media?

	Always	Very Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Very Rarely	Never
Frequency	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

14. Are African American students represented often in the universities social media?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

15. Do the university communication efforts increase your likeliness to continue at this university?

- ☐ Extremely Unlikely
- ☐ Unlikely
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Likely
- ☐ Extremely Likely

\* 16. How important is the inclusion or representation of African Americans in university media to you?

- ☐ Very Important
- ☐ Important
- ☐ Fairly Important
- ☐ Slightly Important
- ☐ Not Important

17. Do the university communication efforts provide you with a more positive experience on campus?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

\* 18. Do you feel like university communications officials listen to African American students?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

\* 19. Do you feel like African Americans are underrepresented in university media?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

20. Did you come to this university based on how they communicate on social media?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

\* 21. What can communications representatives do to ensure minorities are represented positively while avoiding stereotypes?

\* 22. What do you think the university could do to be more inclusive?

### Demographics

23. Are you male or female?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

24. Are you White, Black or African-American, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific islander, or some other race?

- ☐ White
- ☐ Black or African-American
- ☐ American Indian or Alaskan Native
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- ☐ From multiple races
- ☐ Some other race (please specify)

25. What is your age?

- ☐ 17 or younger
- ☐ 18-20
- ☐ 21-26



26. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

- ☐ Less than high school degree
- ☐ High school degree or equivalent (e.g., GED)
- ☐ Some college but no degree
- ☐ Associate degree
- ☐ Bachelor degree
- ☐ Graduate degree

Thank You

**Thank you for your participation in this survey.**

Coding Sheet:

- ◆ P: Represented race was mentioned in a positive way
- ◆ N: Represented race was mentioned in a negative way
- ◆ I: Represented race was neutral impartial, neither positive nor negative
- ◆ S: Represented race was mentioned because of sports
- ◆ NMF: African American was seen in the picture, but not the main focus
- ◆ W: Caucasian person was mentioned
- ◆ HOSU: Student was featured in “Humans of OSU”

VITA

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