

Drew University

College of Liberal Arts

The Relationship Between Gen Z Student-University  
Brand Attachment and Parasocial Relationships

A Thesis in Marketing

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Bachelor in Arts

With Specialized Honors in Marketing

May 2026

## **Abstract**

The competitive higher education market in the United States drives institutions to look for ways to attract the attention of the new prospective students and build long-lasting relationships with the enrolled students. Using the example of Drew University as a brand and its students as consumers, this study aims to discover the significant predictors of a university-brand attachment. One of the main characteristics of Generation Z, the generation of current students, is the digitalization of their daily lives which resulted in the ability to build strong connections with others online. By conducting preliminary interviews with 10 Drew University students and subsequently surveying 135 students on their self-reported parasocial relationship and brand attachment to the university, this study found that the parasocial bond and senior status of students are statistically significant predictors of brand attachment. Moreover, the study discovered that Generation Z students serve multiple roles within the university. While actively consuming Drew's educational services and other offerings, students often generate marketing materials for student clubs as well as for the offices that hire student workers. They are also being incorporated in social media content as a form of micro-influencer marketing. The multifaceted student role in the university marketing intensifies the emotional brand attachment of students toward the university they attend.

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## Introduction

In the competitive higher educational landscape, the main goal of a successful marketing strategy of a university brand is to build long-term relationships with its customers that would ultimately foster strong brand attachment and loyalty (Polkinghorne et al., 2017). This study focuses on discovering what influence the university brand marketing has on the relationships between students and the university they attend. Specifically, this study concentrates on the brand marketing of Drew University and the effect it has on Generation Z, the current undergraduate student population. Existing research suggests that for brands building close relationships with customers is beneficial as it helps foster an enduring competitive advantage in the field (Burnasheva & Suh, 2020). Now that the higher education market in the United States is becoming oversaturated with options and growing more competitive, universities strive to create a loyal consumer base to keep current students engaged and attract new prospective students (Ali-Choudhury et al., 2008). Thus, fueled by the highly competitive industry standards, the brand marketing of a university is nowadays mainly aimed at building and growing strong relationships with its students.

The current undergraduate student population mainly consists of *Generation Z* (Gen Z), a term used to describe those born between the mid-nineties and the beginning of 2010s (Bulanda & Vavrecka, 2019; Dimock, 2019; Van den Bergh & Behrer, 2016; Whitson, 2013). The distinct characteristic of this generation is their ability to form strong relationships through the digital interactions created by the constant need to stay connected (Dimock, 2019). The growth and development of social media platforms brought about new spaces for virtual community building,

which allowed Gen Z consumers to form meaningful connections with other people and brands online (Anjani & Irwansyah, 2020). The digitalization of various aspects of our daily lives led to the emergence of the new types of relationships that psychologists term *parasocial relationships*, the one-sided bond a viewer develops towards a media entity in the process of content consumption (Liebers & Straub, 2020). Because of the constant exposure to social media Gen Z arguably has a greater opportunity to form relationships with the prominent media entities such as brands parasocially (McCrinkle & Fell, 2021). For this generation of consumers digital interaction with brands has just as strong of an effect on building the relationships as an in-person interaction (Djafarova & Foots, 2022; Vitelar, 2019). Taking into account the trend for digital connectivity amongst Gen Z consumers, this study aims to discover the extent to which parasocial relationships can contribute to the development of student attachment to the Drew University brand.

While Gen Z's student relationships with the university brands may begin online, fueled by the brand personification strategies these relationships have the potential to develop into real-life brand attachment (Zhang et al., 2020). The existing research suggests that parasocial relationships can help foster emotional attachment between the audience and individual content creators (Penttinen, 2025). In contrast, this study aims to test the relationships between the two constructs when applied to brands rather than individuals. By taking Drew University brand as an example, this study evaluates the relative success of the current marketing strategies and branding of the higher education sector in fostering brand attachment from the perspective of Gen Z student consumers. In the following section, I review the existing concepts and theories that function as a foundational framework to test the study's hypothesis that students' parasocial relationships with Drew University can predict their university-brand attachment.

## Theoretical Framework

### Digital Marketing

With the rise of digitalization and automation companies began aligning their marketing strategies with fast-evolving market trends, which facilitated access to the information from any part of the world. Digital marketing first began emerging in the late 1970-80s when businesses began utilizing the media technology of the time to improve their sales and customer relations (Gogan, 1996). In the 1990s, the popularization of the Internet presented companies with new opportunities to turn it into an effective marketing communication channel. Online advertising on websites and email marketing communication allowed businesses to cast a wider net to reach more consumers by transcending the boundaries of the physical world (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Digital advertising became an effective tool that provided businesses with opportunities to increase outreach and visibility (Crain, 2013).

Chaffey et al. (2009) defined *digital marketing* as the practice of utilizing digital technologies to achieve marketing goals. A decade later, Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) added layers to the definition of digital marketing by explaining it as the practice of utilizing online platforms and technologies to drive and increase sales and engage customers. Kumar (2025) recognized five distinct digital marketing tactics that differentiate digital marketing from traditional practices. The tactics included 1) *search engine optimization* (SEO), 2) *content marketing*, 3) *e-mail marketing*, 4) *pay-per-click advertising* (PPC), and 5) *social media marketing* (SMM). This study takes into consideration different types of Drew University's digital marketing but mainly concentrates on its SMM strategy as it relates to Gen Z students' ability to build meaningful connections in digital environments.

## **Social Media Marketing**

The popularization of social media platforms by the 2010s changed the established digital marketing strategies by offering simplified ways of delivering messages and connecting with consumers online (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). A decade later, in 2023, it was estimated that social media was used worldwide by more than 4.6 billion people which carries a large opportunity for businesses to grow consumer networks at a faster rate (Tuten, 2023). The ubiquitous qualities of social media and its daily user engagement made it an integral part of today's marketing communication strategies (Rizky, 2020).

The distinct qualities of social media marketing are that it provides consumers with a sense of closeness, fosters communities, and facilitates the delivery of marketing messages and communication. For example, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and more recent X and TikTok give businesses the ability to directly interact with consumers (Anjani & Irwansyah, 2020). Younger generations of consumers treat *social media* as an online networking hub, where Internet users can create, consume and share information about their experiences and thoughts with one another (Chauhan & Pillai, 2013). In marketing, social media is largely considered to be a form of online word of mouth; the informal nature of the communication on social media platforms makes it a perfect place to build close relationships with consumers which differentiates it from more formal e-mail marketing and other digital strategies (Anjani & Irwansyah, 2020; Appel, 2019). *Social media marketing* (SMM) is heavily based on brands and influencers sharing content in the form of visual storytelling, fostering online communities and engaging consumers through two-sided communication (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Since social media is increasingly an integral part of

consumers' lives, this study is going to look into the emerging digital relationships between the Drew University brand and its student consumers.

## **Brands**

While this study refers to Drew University as a brand, it is important to establish what a brand is. Originally, branding had its roots in the ancient tradition of adopting a distinctive mark as a statement of legal ownership (Crainer, 1995; Smith & Aaker, 1992). While branding is not a new concept, the modernity added more layers of complexity to our understanding of brands. In today's world a *brand* is defined as “an evolving mental collection of actual (offer-related) and emotional (human-like) characteristics and associations that convey the benefits of an offer identified through a symbol or a collection of symbols and differentiate this offer from the rest of the marketplace” (Veloutsou & Delgado-Ballester, 2018, p. 256). Nowadays a brand is not simply a mark of ownership, but also emotional stimuli and associations that are created by businesses but exist in the minds of consumers (De Chernatony, 2010). In simple words, the Drew University brand can be considered a collection of symbols, emotional stimuli, and associations that remind student consumers about it. However, non-profit university brands generally have their own unique characteristics that differentiate them from the commercial brands.

## **Universities as Brands**

While companies have a long tradition of branding to achieve higher consumer engagement and profits, non-profit organizations adapted branding strategies relatively recently, yet it swiftly became a widespread strategy across all non-profit entities, including universities (Dholakia & Acciardo, 2014). Higher education institutions became a marketable commodity, and the main reason for such marketization within the educational sector is the heightened competition amongst

universities and colleges that has been increasing over the last few decades fueled by globalization, economic, political, social, and technological changes (Berry & Cassidy, 2013; Hemsley-Brown, 2011; Maringe, 2005; Mause, 2009). The competition among higher education institutions is amplifying as they strive to attract prospective students despite the lowered birthrates and secure funding (Polkinghorne et al., 2017). To gain a competitive edge and a larger market share higher education institutions have increasingly resorted to branding (Aaker, 1996; Le et al., 2023).

Higher education branding is built on displaying the institution's distinctive features and the potential benefits for prospective students (Ali-Choudhury et al., 2008). Ivy League universities are the prime example of the luxurification of higher education and the use of the distinct branding strategies that made them globally known (Sun, 2022). Specifically, researchers discovered that "the higher education brand is multifaceted, encompassing various elements such as logo, image, awareness, identity, differentiation, meaning, strength, impact on satisfaction, consistency, reputation, and personality" (Rutter et al., 2016, p. 20). Additionally, it was found that when consumers feel close to a brand, they tend to have more trust in its offered products; consumers who have trust in a product are more likely to make repeat purchases and stay loyal to the brand (Moriuchi & Takahashi, 2016; Sashi, 2019). Zarella (2009) discovered that brands that are responsive, effective and transparent in their online communication are more likely to earn consumer trust and engagement on social media.

Since the higher education market in the United States is becoming more competitive, universities strive to create a loyal consumer base to attract new students and keep their current students and alumni engaged. Social media networks became a channel for university brands to share content and spread desired messages which facilitates the formation of brand associations

and emotional connections in the minds of consumers (Veloutsou & Delgado-Ballester, 2018). Using the specific example of Drew University, this study focuses on the influence of its marketing on student perceptions of the university brand.

### **Students as Gen Z Consumers**

Today's university students mainly belong to a distinct population grouped as Gen Z (Seemiller & Grace, 2018). Although there is an ongoing debate in the literature on the exact generational cutoff point for Gen Z, scientists generally agree that this generation was born between the mid-nineties and until the beginning of 2010s (Bergh & Behrer, 2016; Bulanda & Vavrecka, 2019; Dimock, 2019; Van den Whitson, 2013). According to The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2021 Gen Z represented 30% of the total global population. As such a large group Gen Z is studied by various scientists that noticed identifiable changes in this generation as compared to their predecessors. Fodor et al. (2018) found that Gen Z have their own attitudes and value systems. Later, Vidya (2021) discovered that this generation also has its distinct characteristics and preferences.

Various scientists built their own theories on the main characteristics of Gen Z. For example, Stillman et al. (2017) found seven main characteristics of Gen Z in the United States: 1) phygital, meaning for Gen Z all physical aspects of life have digital equivalents; 2) hyper-customization of their identity; 3) realistic and pragmatic mindset, especially in planning their future; 4) prone to experience FOMO, the fear of missing out on something; 5) weconomist, meaning Gen Z understands the world economy and seeks for new, practical, and cost-effective ways to build partnerships and resolve problems; 6) big on the DIY, do it yourself movement with the growth of YouTube tutorials that made it possible to learn and do anything on their own; 7)

encouraged and more competitive than other generations. Other researchers seem to agree and add more layers to the characteristic discovered by Stillman and his fellow researchers.

There is a general consensus among the researchers that the main characteristic that sets apart Gen Z from earlier generations is interconnectivity within the digital environment. The ubiquitous qualities of the Internet and social media made it an inextricable part of Gen Z lives, causing them to always stay connected through the digital communities (Stillman et al., 2017). The development of smartphones, Wi-Fi and high-speed cellular networks enabled access to the Internet and social media from anywhere and anytime which shaped the way Gen Z interacts with the information constantly available on demand (Dimock, 2019). That influenced Gen Z's ability to problem-solve by taking advantage of the digital resources available to them (Seemiller & Grace, 2018). Their main information search tool is generally an online search, as it is the most convenient option, which made educators believe that this generation of students has to critically assess whether information is accurate, valid, and reliable (Purcell et al., 2012).

Raised in the twenty-first century, this generation grew up in a culturally diverse environment, learning and forming their views on the world through the digital assets and social media communities (McCrinkle & Fell, 2021). Compared to previous generations, Gen Z is more racially and ethnically diverse, more tolerant of opposing viewpoints, and values safety over free speech that could be found offensive (McKinsey & Company, 2018; Selingo, 2018). According to Christensen (2011), they are focused on the future rather than what is happening right now; they are pragmatic, cautious, judiciously share their personal information, and are active volunteers for change. They value individualized self-representation through the use of social media and brands

to see what brands and products can offer them that would help with their personal branding (Djafarova & Fouts, 2022; Kupec, 2016; Vitelar, 2019; Weinswig, 2016).

Global brands were developing their messages as Gen Z was growing up and turning into the potential consumers. It is important to note that for this generation of consumers digital interactions with brands have just as strong of an effect as an in-person interaction (Stillman et al., 2017). The amount of time that Gen Z spends on social media provides universities with an effective channel to reach students through the well-crafted digital campaigns. Consistent personalized messaging that positions a university as a leader of education and innovation helps maintain the university's reputation, leading to possible growth in student numbers and increases in market performance (O'Sullivan et al., 2024). Additionally, the on-demand constant availability of the information has largely influenced Gen Z's shopping behavior. Growing up with the Amazon business model, they were able to purchase anything at their own convenience, which led to an expectation that they should be able to get products and information quickly and with little effort (Seemiller & Grace, 2018).

### **Parasocial Relationships**

The rise of social media and the development of online communities made the marketing industry adapt to a rapidly changing environment. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter (now X), and LinkedIn emerged at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which allowed brands to interact with their consumers through creating digital profiles to stimulate community involvement (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Nowadays social media platforms are sometimes being referred to as online communities that provide people with support and a sense of belonging, merging the line between virtual and real-life friends (Lazakidou, 2012). Now that the technology has the capability

to help people create meaningful connections with other people and brands online, the psychologists coined a new term to describe these new types of relationships, the parasocial relationships.

The concept of parasocial relationships began emerging in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the context of television technology, when Horton and Wohl (1956) introduced the term *parasocial interaction* as a one-sided mediated form of social engagement between the viewer and a media persona, which could be anyone from the talk show hosts to celebrities or show characters. The sense of connection and engagement was observed when a media persona was directly addressing the viewers behind the screens and looking directly at the camera, causing viewers to feel as if they were directly in a conversation, much like in real life where eye contact intensifies a sense of connection (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). The parasocial interaction through the television allowed viewers exposed to celebrities and their favorite TV characters to develop a sense of intimacy and perceived friendship and identification that was one-sided from viewers' perspective as media personas did not have a chance to see or have direct contact with their viewers (Horton & Wohl, 1956). The parasocial interactions described by Horton and Wohl were found to create a sense of connection that extended beyond single interactions into a string of unique one-sided relationships, which led to the expansion of parasocial interaction into what psychologists termed *parasocial relationships* (Schramm, 2008). While the term parasocial interaction is still used to describe a moment of a specific situational engagement between the media persona and the viewer, the parasocial relationship represents the overarching bond between them that extends beyond single cases of media consumption (Liebers & Straub, 2020). The prominent scientist Gleich (1997) developed a cycle-process model of mutual development between parasocial

interaction and parasocial relationships, suggesting that media consumption triggers the need for communication in users and fulfills this need through the parasocial interaction, which then attributes the positive feelings of being connected to the media persona that furthers the overarching parasocial relationships.

With the current state of the ever-changing technology in our world, the nature of emotional closeness we are able to experience through digital means has changed over time as new types of technology and various online communities emerged. As the connection between the parasocial interactions and relationships was studied, the academic research shifted the focus from traditional celebrities and media personas to the relationships with social media influencers (Li et al., 2023). Researchers Chung and Cho (2017) believe that in the modern world, the parasocial relationship is most frequently formed through social media due to the nature of the online communities that foster intimacy in message delivery. In the social media context, parasocial interaction is the engagement between a social media user and an influencer that appears during content consumption such as watching an Instagram story or reel (Breves & Liebers, 2024). A parasocial relationship in the social media environment forms as followers observe social media personalities, the influencers, watching them reveal their identities and share their emotions and thoughts on a digital platform (Chung & Cho, 2017). Notably, Gen Z has the biggest potential to form relationships parasocially because of the constant exposure to social media (McCrindle & Fell, 2021). For Gen Z the in-person interaction with people is still an important part of their daily lives. Yet, nowadays the online communities and digital relationships are just as important for this generation as real-life interactions (O'Sullivan et al., 2024).

A significant number of studies developed theories and models explaining how parasocial interactions and relationships work and what might influence these relationships. For example, Tukachinsky and Stever (2019) developed a four-stage parasocial relationship model with the stages of initiation, experimentation, intensification, and integration. While their model was based on Knapp's (1978) relationship stage model, they placed it in the modern context where the initiation stage focused on the initial contact and the formation of a superficial impression by the social media user towards an influencer; in the experimentation stage users gather information on the influencer, seeking to validate their initial impressions; the intensification stage marks the growing familiarity and trust with the influencers that extends beyond social media into a real emotional connection, causing followers to discuss the influencers with their peers or seek contact with them; and the integration stage represents the formation of a strong connection, where the parasocial relationship with an influencer becomes a part of the followers' identities. They also discovered that followers may not progress through all stages and take different amounts of time to form these relationships and that the quality and quantity of parasocial interactions is pivotal in moving them through the stages (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019). Researchers Breves and Liebers (2021) also found that longer following durations cause more intense parasocial interactions, higher perceived source credibility, improved attitudes toward sponsored posts, and increased behavioral intentions towards advertised products. The findings by Tukachinsky and Stever (2019) and Breves and Liebers (2021) further prove the cyclic nature of the parasocial interactions and relationships described by Gleich (1997) but add the duration of following time as a significant variable.

While the previous studies largely focused on discovering parasocial relationships with media personas or influencers, this study discovers these relationships from a relatively new perspective of brands. For brands social media provided a unique opportunity to directly appeal to and engage with their audiences (Labrecque, 2014). This led to the emergence of an expectation by social media users that brands are going to seek a relationship with them on digital platforms (Kim & Song, 2016). Now that social media is generally highly personalized, with each user selecting their desired pages to follow and receiving following recommendations based on their interests, users are likely to interact with various media personas and corporate brands online (Labrecque, 2014; Park & Kim, 2014). Yuan et al. (2016) describe the nature of the interactions between the brands and their social media followers as parasocial rather than social because of the heavy mediation and management of a brand's social media page that is usually a collaborative effort of an anonymous marketing team, especially when it comes to corporate brands. In such a setting, the posts, replies and comments made by the brand are often made by different brand managers yet they all blend together in the followers' perception of a brand. Building on the existing research Liu et al. (2019) found that parasocial interaction has the potential to lead to favorable perceptions toward brand quality, brand affect and brand preference of their followers. Moreover, the parasocial relationships were found to thrive in particular when users had a persistent emotional tie facilitated by the emotional messages used by brands (Stern et al., 2007).

### **Brand Attachment**

While the existing research suggests that there is a connection between parasocial relationships and brand attachment, this research seeks to establish the predictive nature of their relationships. Despite the overwhelming amount of advertisement and various brand interactions

experienced by consumers in their daily lives both digitally and in person, an intense emotional attachment is only formed by consumers with a small subset of brands (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). The researchers established human capacity to form emotional attachments to a variety of entities, including pets, places, celebrities, influencers, and brands (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; Alperstein, 1991; Hirschman, 1994; Rubinstein & Parmelee, 1992; Sable, 1995). The emotional attachments to brands such as Coca-Cola and Hallmark were researched by Slater (2000), who discovered that devoted collectors experience a variety of emotions towards these brands described as warm feelings or love.

This research aims to discover whether Drew University students may experience similar warm feelings towards the university they attend, drawing from the three-factor model by Thomson et al. (2005) that characterizes brand attachment in terms of three emotional components: affection, passion, and connection. When attachment is strong, it triggers emotions, which led the researchers to measure brand attachment based purely on emotions of affection, passion, and connection. Other researchers have built upon Thomson et al.'s (2005) findings and developed their own models such as Park et al.'s (2010) two-factor model of attachment characterized by the brand-self connection and brand prominence that according to the authors captures all the emotions that accompany attachment, including joy, excitement, pride, contentment, relief, nostalgia, and any other feelings that may appear.

While in the person-to-person context emotional attachments were found to predict a person's commitment to the relationship with another person, in terms of brands emotional attachments were found to have an influence on commitment to the brand or brand loyalty, consumer willingness to pay a price premium, positive word-of-mouth and intention to purchase

(Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; Fedorikhin et al., 2008; Japutra et al., 2014; Park et al., 2010; Thomson et al., 2005). The predictive power of brand attachment towards the consumer's willingness-to-pay and positive word-of-mouth is especially important when looking at the university brands as these metrics directly influence the institution's revenue (Girardin et al., 2023). Moreover, Mostafa & Kasamani (2021) discovered that emotional connections with brands are fostered by stimulating consumers' brand passion, self-brand cohesion, and brand sentiment, all of which lead to improved brand loyalty, which is especially relevant in the higher education context. At the same time, Dennis et al. (2016) developed a framework that emphasized the importance of building the student-university brand relationship, discovering that higher education brand attachment is a strong predictor of students' commitment, satisfaction and trust towards their educational institution.

### **Personification of Brands**

When looking at the parasocial relationships and emotional attachment to brands it is important to keep in mind that nowadays brands are often anthropomorphized. Anthropomorphism is an automatic cognitive process of attributing human-like characteristics of emotions or behavior to the non-human entities, such as animals or other living beings, material objects, or abstract concepts (Epley et al., 2007). A brand as an abstract concept can be personified or anthropomorphized. Drawing from Guthrie's (1993) definition of animism Huang and Mitchell (2014) discovered close relationships between a brand personality and *brand personification*, described as a "consumer tendency to attribute human life to brands" (p. 40). Aaker & Fournier (1995) define brand anthropomorphism in terms of operationalization as the extent to which a brand is perceived to have certain human characteristics. Portal et al. (2018), on the other hand,

base their definition on the personification theory in social psychology, describing brand anthropomorphism as a process of attributing unique human characteristics, emotions, intentions, and personalities to brands. There are also theories that brand anthropomorphism refers to the attributions of mind to the brands, going beyond humanizing the observable actions and behaviors (Huaman-Ramirez et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2020; Puzakova & Kwak, 2017).

Brand personification is a popular marketing tool that by attributing the brand with human characteristics, behaviors and emotions enhances consumers' perceived value and recognition of the brand as well as the feeling of closeness in consumers' minds (Jin & Qian, 2021; Portal et al., 2018). The important elements of a successful anthropomorphic marketing strategy are creating a sense of social presence and the emotional bond between the brands and their consumers (Zhang & Choi, 2023). The use of brand personification should not only stimulate positive consumer feelings for the brand but also strengthen emotional dependence, a sense of warmth and trust in the brand, which are found to improve brand attitude and increase purchase intentions (Han et al., 2021; Jianfeng et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2020). Researchers discovered that giving brands human-like personalities and emotions makes them appear more cordial and more like real people on social media platforms, enhancing the brand's overall social presence and credibility (Kim et al., 2020). Emotional connection plays a pivotal mediating role in establishing long-term consumer-brand relationships through the brand personification strategy by evoking empathy and a sense of belonging in consumers (Bhalla, 2021). Through the anthropomorphic marketing strategy, brands are able to stimulate consumers' emotional responses that establish deeper emotional bonds, causing consumers to refer to the brand as their friend or family (Lee et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2020).

In creating marketing for higher educational brands, it is important to build and utilize the emotional connection with consumers as it is found to increase brand loyalty and goodwill and influence consumer purchasing behavior (Nguyen, 2024). Gen Z, the generation of current undergraduate students, was raised in the peak digital technology advancement era with an expectation that the information would be easily available to them on demand (Dimock, 2019). Gen Z is also well known for their tendency to showcase their distinct identity and utilize various self-branding strategies (Djafarova & Foots, 2022; Kupec, 2016; Vitelar, 2019; Weinswig, 2016). Students are often going through the stage of life in which their identity is still questioned and evolving, and the higher educational institutions that they attend become the pillars for their identity construction by helping them shape their personal and professional identities through their student experience (Adams et al., 2000; Lairio et al., 2013). The past research suggests that the clear communication of brand personality traits of a higher educational institution can positively influence authenticity perceptions, allowing students to identify with it as they build their own identity (Rutter et al., 2016). Thus, the use of a brand anthropomorphism strategy is particularly successful in reaching Gen Z audiences, as for consumers it often signifies the authenticity of the brand, facilitating consumer interpretation of brand values and supporting consumers in constructing their own identity, both of which are particularly important characteristics of Gen Z consumer behavior (Morhart et al., 2015). In the context of higher education, most of the sincere and warm interactions that students have with the institutional brands are with people: the faculty, staff and their peers that are the epitome of anthropomorphic agents (Portal et al., 2018). This suggests that Gen Z's student relationships with the university brands may begin online through the parasocial interactions and the formation of the initial parasocial relationships, but eventually,

fueled by the brand personification strategies, this relationship can grow into the real-life brand attachment.

### **Social Media Influencers**

Since the concept of parasocial relationships is generally attributed to the bond media users create towards the influencers, in this section the study places the relationships between Gen Z and social media influencers in the modern context (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). De Veirman et al. (2017) and Abidin (2016) explain *social media influencers* as the users of social media platforms who have built a substantial network of followers by posting textual and visual narrations of their daily lives and who hold significant influence over a group of their followers. Leung et al. (2022) more specifically define social media influencers as “individuals, groups, or even virtual avatars who have built a network of followers on social media and are regarded as digital opinion leaders with significant social influence on their network” (p. 228). At the same time, Scheer and Stern (1992) conceptualize the four principal stages of the marketing power dynamic happening when an influencer is able to persuade a target to engage in a specific action prompted by the brand: 1) an influencer’s influence attempts; 2) a target’s attitudinal response to the influence; 3) the target’s desire to comply; 4) the target’s behavioral outcomes.

The concept of a social media influencer began emerging when social media became increasingly more mainstream, and marketers realized the power of message delivery through the popular opinion leaders, their image and their competence (Freire et al., 2018). As social media united popular culture with digital platforms, utilizing the popularity of influencers for advertising purposes allowed companies to establish closer relationships with their consumers (Aw & Labrecque, 2020). Social media influencers became the potential spokespersons for the

represented brands, without the need to fully commit to becoming brand ambassadors (Freberg et al., 2011). Since psychologists discovered that people are able to form parasocial relationships with social media influencers in the same way that they form regular social relationships, marketers began effectively leveraging social media influencers to promote their offerings (Dibble et al., 2016). Found on all social media platforms, including Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter (X), and YouTube, among others, influencers can use their extensive network of followers to showcase their personal brands by sharing creative content showing their ideas, thoughts, and expertise regarding their life or sponsored brand messages (Izwan & Baharom, 2024). Social media serves as a channel for brands to engage with their followers, which was found to have an effect on consumer attitudes and cause increased company sales and profitability (Hughes et al., 2019; Leung et al., 2022).

The research confirms that social media influencers specifically play an important role in Gen Z's lives (Spalova et al., 2021). A report by Williams suggests that in 2020 70% of Gen Z consumers followed at least one influencer on social media, and almost half of them have made purchase decisions based on product recommendations from influencers. Five years later in 2025, West found that 46% of Gen Z followed more than ten influencers on social media, showing that the numbers are steadily growing day by day, which allows brands to use influencers to reach this demographic. Moreover, as a generation focused on self-expression and personal branding, a lot of Gen Z consumers want to become influencers themselves (Chae, 2018). They constantly strive for approval and acceptance from their peers and tend to be influenced by experiences and recommendations from their peers, who often become micro-influencers in their communities (Cruz et al., 2017; Goldring & Azab, 2021; Puiu, 2016; Williams et al., 2010).

## **Micro-Influencers**

*Micro-influencers* are the subgroup of influencers who are not as well-known as celebrities but have their own enthusiastic though limited number of followers, generally spanning between a few thousand to hundreds of thousands (Conde & Casais, 2023). These types of influencers often engage more closely with their followers and are usually seen as credible experts in what they post about (Chang et al., 2019). For brands, collaborating with micro-celebrities on social media is beneficial because this type of communication feels more authentic and more targeted (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). The intimate bonding between a micro-influencer and their followers occurs parasocially, following Gleich's (1997) theory of a dynamic cyclical exchange between parasocial interactions and relationships and generally progresses through the parasocial relationship stages described by Tukachinsky and Stever (2019). Therefore, it is beneficial for brands, including those in the higher education field, to utilize a micro-influencer marketing strategy since followers tend to create more trustworthy and authentic bonds with micro-influencers than with traditional celebrities (Enberg, 2018).

## **Firm-created and User-generated content**

Another important component of higher education brand marketing is the prevalence of user-generated content that coexists with the firm-created content, shaping consumer perceptions of the brand (Christodoulides et al., 2012). With the development of online brand communities on social networking platforms, social media became a tool that facilitated and accelerated brand-to-consumer and consumer-to-consumer communication, causing user-generated content to drive brand conversations and consumer insights (Duan et al., 2008; Gangadharbatla, 2008). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development defines *user-generated content* as

content that is created outside of professional routines and practices and made publicly available on the Internet, reflecting a certain amount of creative effort (OECD, 2021). Daugherty et al. (2008) note that user-generated content is focused on the consumer dimension, as it is created by the general public for the public on the Internet rather than by marketing professionals. User-generated content related to a certain brand is also known as *user-generated branding* (Burmam & Arnhold, 2008).

While firm-created content is considered an essential element of the company's promotion mix, the user-generated content is seen as simply an electronic word-of-mouth (Kozinets et al., 2010; Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Muñiz & Schau, 2007). The main difference between the concepts is that user-generated content is created by consumers, while electronic word-of-mouth is only the dissemination of the information (Cheong & Morrison, 2008; Smith et al., 2012). Consumers were found to be flexible and adept at impersonating the specific company styles, values, and logic of the firm-generated marketing (Muñiz & Schau, 2007). The reasons consumers enthusiastically contribute their creative content to companies are self-promotion, intrinsic enjoyment, and the desire to change public perceptions (Berthon et al., 2008). Daugherty et al. (2008) found that consumers that generate content for companies are likely to be brand advocates, excited to share their opinions about brands and their products with others. Research has confirmed that positive user-generated content can increase consumer trust toward company products or services (Erkan & Evans, 2016). Christodoulides et al. (2012) discovered that because this type of content is perceived by consumers as trustworthy, it is often considered to be more influential than traditional advertising. They found that the creation of user-generated content influences the consumer's involvement with the brand, which has a positive impact on brand equity.

### **Addressing Existing Research Limitations**

This section contains a detailed overview of the existing research on parasocial relationships and brand attachment and the gaps in the past research addressed by this study. Emerging in the middle of the 20th century, the concept of parasocial relationships was initially centered around the viewer's perception of the media persona through the television. Horton and Wohl (1956) were the first to describe the parasocial interactions they observed between television personalities and viewers. Building upon their fascinating discoveries, other researchers such as Auter (1992), Gleich (1997), Levy (1979), Perse and Rubin (1989), and Rosengren et al. (1976) continued discovering the concept, eventually describing a string of continuous interactions between the viewer and media personae as parasocial relationships.

With the popularization of the Internet and social media, consumer behavior began inevitably changing. To reflect the changes that came with time, the research on parasocial relationships began focusing on the parasocial phenomena occurring through the social media networking platforms as opposed to the now less popular television. For example, De Veirman et al. (2017) studied how the number of the influencer's followers affects their perceived popularity and trustworthiness. On the other hand, Lee and Watkins (2016) discovered that the perceived authenticity of influencers can affect followers' trust and loyalty, which then influences their purchasing decisions. Other researchers such as Boerman and Van Reijmersdal (2020), Breves & Liebers (2024), Kim (2021), Leite and Baptista (2021), Liebers and Straub (2020), and Li et al. (2023) also concentrated on studying the viewer's relationship with social media influencers instead of traditional TV celebrities.

### *Brand Attachment and Parasocial Relationships*

One of the biggest research gaps discovered by this study is exploring the relationships between brand parasocial relationships in relation to emotional attachment. While the majority of the existing studies tested parasocial relationships on social media in regard to influencers, only some of them decided to go further and look not just at social media influencer profiles but at brands as independent media entities to discover how social media users may bond with them parasocially. Specifically, Chung & Cho (2017), Kim & Song (2016), Labrecque (2014), Lacap et al. (2023), and Yuan et al. (2016) dedicated their research to parasocial relationships with brands. However, despite the existence of the research on brand parasocial relationships, its influence on brand attachment has not been thoroughly studied. Lacap et al.'s (2023) study tested the relationships between six constructs: social media interactions, self-disclosure, parasocial relationships, source trustworthiness, brand credibility, and brand loyalty. One of the main limitations of the study was that it predominantly focused on discovering customer loyalty in the context of parasocial relationships. At the end of the study authors suggested that “future research may be expanded by exploring the relationship between brand love and parasocial relationships and their impact on customer lifetime value as a measure of customer profitability and the business’s long-term growth” (p. 91). This is especially relevant to this study as the higher education sector in the United States is getting more competitive over the years and university brands have to discover ways to emotionally connect with their students to be able to stay in business. Following the suggestion by Lacap et al. (2023) this study is aimed at generating new knowledge in the field by studying the relationships between brand attachment and parasocial relationships.

### *The Predictive Power of Parasocial Relationships*

While Lacap et al. suggest the existing connection between brand attachment and parasocial relationship, this study identified a need to link the two constructs in a bigger model to understand how they influence each other. The hypothesis proposed by this study is that students' parasocial bond with the Drew University brand could predict their emotional brand attachment. Numerous marketing researchers were interested in studying consumers' attachment to brands, including Chaplin and John (2005), Fedorikhin et al. (2008), Park et al. (2010), Schouten and McAlexander (1995), and Thomson et al. (2005). Since there is a suggested correlation between brand attachment and parasocial relationship this study is interested in discovering whether the relationship initiated in digital spaces could predict how overall attached the consumer will feel toward the brand. Therefore, this study aims to generate new knowledge by not just establishing correlation but also discovering the predictive relationships between the two constructs through the regression analysis.

### *Consistent University Brand for All Participants*

To be able to comprehensively explore the suggested predictive power of parasocial relationships by keeping the brand consistent for all participating consumers, this study selected Drew University as a common brand well-known to its students. The decision to select a single brand for this study was based on the limitation experienced by Thomson et al. (2005) in their research on brand attachment. The main limitation of their study was that “consumers were asked to self-select a brand, corresponding to varying degrees of emotional attachment as directed by the respective instrument condition that they received” (p. 89). Thomson et al. (2005) suggested that picking a common brand for data collection will be advantageous to discover the specific

emotional attachment conditions that correspond to a certain brand. Universities are unique types of brands, and their consumers of educational services are currently represented by Gen Z. Gen Z, raised in an era of extreme digital advancement, values digital communities just as much as real-world interactions, which suggests that they are more likely to build parasocial relationships with brands than other generations. As a generation of current students Gen Z's consumer behavior is important to be studied to further improve the higher educational branding for the upcoming generations (Berman & Kesterson-Townes, 2012). Selecting Drew University as a single brand will help keep the results consistent across emotional attachment metrics to focus on the specific predictive power of parasocial relationships.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to generate new knowledge by exploring the relationship between the student's parasocial relationships and emotional attachment to Drew University as a brand. The study specifically focuses on Gen Z, the generation of current undergraduate students, and on Drew University as a consistent brand. The primary goal is to discover whether students' parasocial relationship with Drew University can predict their emotional attachment to the university.

## Phase 1: Interviews

### Introduction

This study consists of two phases: an initial qualitative interview phase and a larger quantitative two-part survey. The purpose of interviewing students is to explore the nature and complexity of the parasocial relationships and potential attachment students may feel towards Drew University.

#### *Interview Participants*

The first phase involved structured interviews with ten Drew University students who actively agreed to take part in a brief structured in-person interview. Participants were not financially compensated for their involvement. The recruitment was conducted through a convenience sampling procedure that involved approaching easily accessible students who met the selection criteria in common places on campus. The specific selection criteria were that participants must be currently enrolled students at Drew University and 18 years of age or older. During the interviews participants were asked to reflect on their emotional attachments and feelings about Drew University. To minimize the psychological discomfort the participants were informed both verbally and on paper that their participation is voluntary and they have the right to skip questions or stop the interview at any time without penalties.

#### *Consent*

The study participants were informed of their voluntary involvement through the consent form (see Appendix A: Consent Form) at the beginning of the interview to ensure that they were aware that their data were confidential for the duration of the study and would be fully anonymized before the publication. The consent form contained information on the study's purpose and

participant right to withdraw or skip questions at any time. All participants were required to sign a physical copy of the consent form, confirming their voluntary participation in the study and that they are over 18 years old. The main points were also verbally reviewed before participants provided their consent. Additionally, students were required to provide clear verbal consent to be audio-recorded for transcription purposes before the interviews began. The audio recordings were transcribed and anonymized right after the interviews. The original audio files were deleted shortly after transcription to protect the participants' confidentiality.

### *Debriefing*

Some aspects of the research were not disclosed to participants at the beginning and up until the end of the interview. Specifically, the consent form (see Appendix A: Consent Form) did not provide the details on the constructs used in the study, preventing the emergence of the unconscious biases. Participants were not informed that the study was designed to test the predictive qualities of their parasocial relationship with Drew University to their brand attachment. This was necessary to ensure that participants did not consciously or subconsciously exaggerate the relationship in their interview responses, which helped preserve the validity of the data. The risk of not disclosing this information was minimal, as no psychologically harmful information was withheld. The details of the study were fully disclosed to all interview participants after the interview phase was finished. The participants received the debriefing form (see Appendix B: Debriefing Form) that contained a complete disclosure of the constructs and other details of the study they participated in. Since some aspects of the research were withheld from the participants throughout the interview, the debriefing form provided a necessary ethical disclosure of the full purpose and nature of the study to resolve any potential confusion or discomfort.

## **Methods and Measures**

### *Introduction Questions*

The interview (see Appendix C: Interviews) was kicked off by two introduction questions, followed by two questions about friendship, two questions about understanding or identification with the Drew brand, three questions on brand attachment to Drew University, and ended with a few demographic questions. At the beginning of the interview, participants were verbally informed that they could choose not to answer any interview question and could stop responding at any time. The introduction questions (see Appendix C: Interviews) helped set up the topic of the interview by steering the conversation towards the social media environment. The answers to introductory questions provided a valuable insight into interviewees' relationship with social media and their familiarity with Drew University social media pages.

### *Friendship and Understanding or Identification*

After the two introductory questions, participants were asked to respond to a total of four questions about their perceived parasocial relationship with Drew University. The four questions were based on Chung and Cho's (2017) friendship and understanding (identification) framework developed to measure self-reported parasocial relationship scores. Chung and Cho's (2017) measurement scale includes a total of nine questions, three about friendship and six about understanding or identification. To keep the interviews succinct, out of nine questions only four were included in the interview: two questions about friendship and two about understanding (identification). The selected questions were rephrased to be open-ended for interview purposes. Even though the questions were slightly altered, they were helpful in preliminary assessing whether students experienced some degree of parasocial involvement with Drew University.

### *Brand-Self Connection and Brand Prominence*

After the questions on the perceived parasocial relationships, participants were asked three questions on brand attachment that were selected from Park et al.'s (2010) parsimonious 4-item version of the two-factor scale. The scale measures brand attachment in terms of the brand-self connection and brand prominence. One of the selected questions was chosen from the brand-self connection category and two from the brand prominence. Similar to how friendship and identification questions were altered to be open-ended, the brand attachment questions were modified for the interview and adapted to the context of a Drew University brand. The purpose of brand attachment questions was to help uncover the complex layers of student attachment to the university and how it may relate to their reported parasocial relationships.

### *Demographics*

The interviews concluded with a set of demographic questions needed to collect the information to describe the interview sample population. Participants were reminded that they reserve the right not to answer any of the demographic questions if they do not wish to disclose their personal information, and yet most of the respondents provided complete answers. Participants were asked to identify their gender, class year, living situation, primary Drew news source, major, and financial aid situation (see Appendix C: Interviews). The demographic interview questions helped provide more background for the data analysis in the second, quantitative phase of this study by helping attribute certain findings to specific categories of students.

### **Respondent Demographics**

This section provides the description of the respondent demographic for the ten interviewed Drew University students actively enrolled in classes this academic year and over 18 years old. All respondents signed the consent form and actively agreed to participate in the study. The interviews were conducted over the winter break when Drew University's social media is relatively inactive. Although the sample was fairly small with only ten respondents, the interview sample population was evenly distributed among different categories (see Appendix C: Interviews). Six out of ten students identified as male and four as female. Student majors of interest spanned different departments and majors including computer science, psychology, languages, international relations, biology, economics, philosophy, and divinity studies. Six interviewed students were juniors, one was a sophomore, two were seniors, and one student was in graduate school. Nine students reported living on campus, and one student was a commuter. Moreover, five out of ten students were working on campus. Eight students reported receiving either government need-based financial aid or Drew University grants. Overall, the respondent sample was diverse enough to provide this study with different student perspectives.

## **Results**

The interview was designed in a structured way with a variety of questions about the parasocial relationships and brand attachment constructs. The open-ended nature of the interviews allowed this study to identify some of the main recurring themes and ideas from the interviews.

### *Student Social Media Usage*

As expected from Gen Z, raised in the times of digital technology uplift, all of the respondents had personal social media accounts on various platforms. The most used social media platform amongst the interview participants was Instagram. All ten interviewed students reported

using Instagram, which is one of the main platforms for Drew University's social media marketing. For example, Respondent 8, an international student, specifically mentioned using Instagram to stay connected with his friends and family, and Respondent 4 mentioned using it for entertainment. Besides Instagram, six students reported using Snapchat, four students are on TikTok, three are on Facebook, three are on YouTube, two are on LinkedIn and two are on Reddit. Respondent 8 specified that he used YouTube for research purposes because it offers slow media that keeps him focused. Respondent 6, male, junior, uses LinkedIn to look at other people's jobs. Additionally, Respondent 2 mentioned using GroupMe, a platform often used to create group chat rooms amongst students. Respondent 5 also reported using YikYak to check on posts about Drew University and its community.<sup>1</sup> Although both Respondent 2 and Respondent 5 live on campus they are still actively involved in Drew University's online communities. The students' mention of GroupMe and YikYak as some of the most used social media platforms suggests the presence of student desire to stay connected to the Drew University campus even in their free time, which is one of the components of consumer-brand identification in Chung and Cho's (2017) parasocial relationship model. Moreover, one of the main characteristics of Gen Z is often experiencing fear of missing out, which may contribute to the student's need to stay connected and get the latest news about the Drew community (Stillman et al., 2017). Since all of the respondents were active users of social media platforms such as Instagram, they were asked to list which Drew University social media accounts they were following, if any.

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<sup>1</sup> YikYak is an anonymous digital platform that provides students with an opportunity to connect with fellow students on their campus by posting and replying to other student posts.

### *Most Followed Drew University Social Media Accounts*

All of the respondents reported following different official and unofficial Drew University Instagram accounts. Respondent 10, a graduate student in the final year of his studies at Drew, mentioned following both Instagram and Facebook university profiles. Seven out of ten respondents reported that they followed the official Drew University Instagram page (@drewuniversity) that currently has approximately 11.6K followers. Respondent 4 explains that the reason he follows the official page is to keep in touch with the news. Moreover, it is important to note that students are mainly following pages that align with their interests, such as different student clubs and sports. Four interview participants specifically mentioned following the official Drew University Athletics Instagram page (@godrewrangers) that has approximately 3.6K followers. Respondent 1 reported that he is specifically following pages of some of the sports teams he is involved in, and Respondent 8 followed a Swimming Athletics Instagram page (@drewuswimming, 1.2K followers) because his friends were a part of the swimming team. Overall, most of the interview participants follow the official page, various student club pages, and sports pages but are not limited to those. Respondent 3 mentioned following Drew Dining Services (@drewu\_eats, 1.4K followers), Respondent 4 and 8 the International Student Life (@drew\_international, 450 followers), Respondent 6 Drew University Library page (@drewulibrary, 800 followers), Respondents 6 and 7 Drew University Residence Life (@drewuniversityreslife, 1.6K followers). Respondent 7 reported following a lot of different student clubs due to the fact that she is a part of many of them. Similarly, Respondent 5 is following a few of the student organizations and is, in fact, running one of them.

### *Student-Generated Content*

It is important to make a distinction that when thinking about Drew University's social media students keep in mind *both* the official university accounts as well as student-made club accounts. Any social media page that includes the name of the university was thought of and mentioned by students regardless of whether it was made by Drew University's marketing team or by students. While the content posted on official Drew University pages can be characterized as firm-generated, the content on student-created club pages for clubs can be seen as user-generated. In a traditional sense, the term *user-generated content* emerged to describe the content created by fans for fans (Daugherty et al., 2008). In higher education, students act as the users of the educational services of the institution they attend. In this context, student club social media accounts used to market events planned by the specific student organization for their campus community are generally curated by students for other students, which makes them user-generated. The existing research on user-generated content indicates that it has a potential to strengthen the relationships between consumers and companies, seeing user-generated content helps consumers perceive a business as more valuable since its fans are willing to put in their time and resources to promote it (Berthon et al., 2008; Christodoulides et al., 2012). Similarly, for higher educational institutions, the time and resource commitment of students participating in student clubs to generate content on student club pages serves as a signal of their university-brand loyalty. From the outside perspective of Generation Z and Generation Alpha prospective students, the quantity and quality of student-generated content can serve as a tool for determining the institutional value of a university they plan to attend.

#### *Student Worker Involvement*

While Drew University students act as users of its educational services, they are also active content generators both on the official and unofficial pages. Drew University student workers often have the opportunity to contribute to the content ideation and creation for the university's social media. For example, Drew University's admissions office's social media page often features content generated by its student workers (@drewadmissions, 2.3K followers). When asked about the tone of social media posts Respondent 4 mentioned, "the posts I see are usually made up of various forms of content, such as interviewing people, just like right now, or interviewing students or presidents, or pictures from the events" (see Appendix C: Interviews). By creating such posts student workers have the ability to feature themselves, their friends and other peers in the content they produce for the official pages. Respondent 4 agreed that Drew University's social media reflects what students like and explained: "Those contents I see on Instagram are also produced by our students. So even though I don't directly participate in the process I feel like it makes me more feel like one of the components on the campus" (see Appendix C: Interviews). By understanding the needs and interests of their peers, student workers are able to generate engaging content for the official pages, creating the sense of closeness and belonging across both the official and unofficial accounts.

#### *Student Micro-Influencers*

Another distinct trait of Drew University's social media is featuring its students in its posts, both on the official and unofficial pages. Instead of drafting celebrities or big influencers to promote the campus, Drew University utilizes its students in its content, which resembles the micro-influencer marketing strategy. Micro-influencers are known for creating loyal relationships with their relatively small follower count, which makes each advertisement from the brand more

targeted towards its relatively small circle of followers (Conde & Casais, 2023). Drew University's student community is relatively small, with an estimated 1626 undergraduate students enrolled in the 2024-2025 academic year (College Tuition Compare, n.d.). In a tight community such as this one, students get to know a lot of their peers through the classes they take together as well as different extracurricular activities. For brands, the relationship between consumers and micro-influencers, as opposed to celebrities, is generally characterized as more genuine and authentic (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Looking at Drew University's marketing strategy from the perspective of a higher educational brand it is beneficial to utilize students as its main promoters; students love to see their friends and campus acquaintances featured on Drew's social media pages, as it helps create a sense of closeness and belonging to the community. When students see their peers, the community micro-influencers, incorporated in Drew's social media content, it makes them feel emotionally closer to the university, which further increases the brand attachment.

### *Friendship*

The participants were asked four questions to test their feeling of friendship and understanding or identification with Drew University's social media (see Appendix C: Interviews). The words used to describe Drew University posts included *friendly*, *family*, *good*, and *strongly loved*, all suggesting a warm relationship and an emotional bond from students towards the university. Five of the participating students described the tone of Drew University posts as casual and friendly. For example, Respondent 3 comments on the tone of Drew's social media posts: "It's friendly. I think it's, I think it's very open, like, it's easy to navigate your way through." At the same time, while half of the participants find the tone to be friendly, three respondents feel like the tone of Drew University posts is more official or professional. Respondent 9 describes the tone

as official, clarifying: “Just the main pages. Like I think of all of the ones you can tell where it's more official people having it, but the club pages are more informal.” Respondent 1 also noticed the differences in the tone of the official and student club accounts. For him, the tone of the posts is neutral: “Some of them are strictly information-related to the university. Some of them are very friendly and trying to bring attention for new students,” he says, explaining that the tone depends on the purpose of the post.

### *Brand Personification Strategy*

Drew University’s brand marketing could benefit from the use of the brand personification marketing strategy. During the interview, participants were asked to describe their relationship with Drew University as if it were a person (see Appendix C: Interviews). Respondent 1, a sophomore, said they would be “strictly colleagues,” and Respondent 7, a senior, used words like “calm” and “collected” to describe the relationships. Respondent 2, a junior, said that their relationships are “still fresh” and they are “learning about each other,” and Respondent 5, a senior, described a similar sentiment, saying that they would be “lukewarm acquaintances.” Respondent 3, a junior, said that their relationships with Drew would be well. For her Drew is “like a friend you would see on the path, but you wouldn't, like, go up to, like, you'd see them, wave, and then that'd be about it,” she says, describing complex feelings of friendship. Respondent 6, a junior, described the relationship as “good” and “helpful,” and Respondent 8, a junior, as “respectful,” saying that Drew would be “like a gym coach.” Respondent 4, a rising senior graduating in the fall of 2026, called Drew “family.” A junior, Respondent 9, said Drew is “strong loved,” and Respondent 10, a graduate student, used words like “friendship” and “hospitality.” Overall, student attitudes towards Drew were positive, and some of the students reached a friendship or family-like

bond with Drew University. Students did not experience difficulty in imagining Drew as a person, especially since the university's name resembles a name of a human.

#### *Understanding or Identification*

The interviewed students were also asked a few questions to test the extent to which Drew University understands its customers and whether the students can identify with it (see Appendix C: Interviews). Six out of nine students that responded to the question said that they believe Drew's social media reflects what students care about. Respondent 10 shared the same sentiment as Respondent 5, explaining how the university's social media reflects the interests of the student population: "They [Drew's marketing team] post a lot of events, a lot of activities related with the entertainment and academic events, as well as spiritual life of students." Respondent 8, on the other hand, disagreed, arguing that Drew's social media can be biased and there is not enough diversification online, which you could see in person. Respondent 9 was upset that posts are often made using photos of people she does not recognize. Moreover, most of the interview participants generally reported that the way Drew posts on social media does not change how they feel about the university as a whole, which may signify that students prefer to separate Drew University's digital brand image from its in-person campus environment.

#### *Brand-Self Connection and Brand Prominence*

To find signs of brand attachment, students were asked to describe how they feel when they did not see updates from Drew University for a while (see Appendix C: Interviews). On one side, respondents 2, 3 and 8 expressed that they do not notice or are too busy to notice if that happens. On the other side, respondents 1, 4 and 10 were missing and longing for Drew University to post, displaying a high likelihood of being emotionally attached to the university. Respondent

1, a sophomore, campus resident commented: “I feel disconnected,” reflecting on his experience during the winter break. For him, social media updates from Drew University are a way to connect to the campus environment, which was particularly hard during the break due to the lack of updates. Respondents 4 and 10 both expressed that they miss it when Drew does not post for some time. Respondent 10, a graduate student expresses with a sigh: “I miss it. I notice,” displaying a high likelihood of a brand attachment bond. Although students have different perceptions of the need to keep seeing updates from Drew, it is clear that for some of the respondents it is not only needed during the academic year but also during the break to be able to stay connected to the campus.

#### *Student Attitudes*

Overall, student attitudes towards Drew University are positive. Most of the respondents never encountered a negative comment or criticism towards the university online. Moreover, when talking to others about Drew the respondents have only good things to say about it. Respondents 4 and 8 like to share their perception of Drew University as a very student-centered school thanks to the small class sizes and a big number of events happening on or off campus. Respondent 6 shares the same sentiment: “It's a small community, but the interaction is also very frequent for that reason,” he says, enjoying the ability to build stronger connections with others. Respondent 10 also enjoys his student life at Drew, enthusiastically describing how many facilities the university has for students, such as a good gym, the basketball field and the swimming pool, among others. Respondent 9 expresses that for her the first description that comes to mind when talking about Drew is happiness: “This is a very happy place for me. So every time I talk about Drew, it's always from a good place,” she said with a bright smile on her face.

## Summary

Student responses to the interview showed that generally students are satisfied with their experience at Drew University. The university brand could benefit from the use of the brand personification marketing strategy, especially since students are positively predisposed to imagining Drew as their friend, family, or a loved one. Student positive attitudes towards the brand suggest that, as this study hypothesized, they are likely experiencing a certain degree of attachment to Drew. The interview also confirmed that Drew's brand-student relationship may begin parasocially, as all interviewed students reported using Instagram for news and entertainment, and seven out of them followed Drew's official Instagram page (@drewuniversity, 11.6K followers).

Other popular Drew social media accounts to follow are different student club and sports team accounts. Interestingly, respondents do not make a clear distinction between the official Drew University accounts that post so-called firm-generated content and student-made club accounts, posting user-generated content. There are a few reasons why students may not make a large distinction between the two. First, students often get hired by Drew offices and get opportunities to create content for the official university's social media as well as the student clubs they are a part of. Second, students as community micro-influencers are often featured in the posts themselves, both on the official and unofficial pages.

For students, being constantly exposed to the content made by other students and seeing their fellow peers in the digital spaces creates the overall sense of closeness and community. Some students even feel disconnected when Drew does not post for a while, which is one of the signs of the emerging parasocial bond. The interviews showed that the hypothesis that parasocial

relationships may predict brand attachment is viable in the Drew University setting, allowing this study to proceed with the second, quantitative phase.

## Phase 2: Surveying

### Introduction

Since the preliminary interviews in the first phase suggested the hypothesis is viable in the Drew University setting, the study advanced to the second phase. The second phase is quantitative, aimed at gathering and analyzing the data from Drew University students to test the study's hypothesis. To collect the data, the study distributed two online surveys via the official Drew University student email: one survey on parasocial relationships and the second one on brand attachment. The surveys were given to the same subset of students, separated by one month in between to minimize the potential memory biases. Students were able to skip questions or withdraw from the study at any point throughout the data collection process.

#### *Survey Design*

The first survey was aired at the beginning of the spring 2026 semester and required students to respond to questions regarding their perceived parasocial relationship with Drew. Additionally, the first survey included demographic and attention check questions at the end. The second survey was administered one month later and required the same student sample body to respond to questions measuring their brand attachment to Drew University and an attention check question to ensure the validity of the results. Surveys were designed to accommodate the common variance limitation between the two main constructs by separating the predictor, parasocial relationship, and outcome, brand attachment, variables in time. This helped minimize biases in student responses by providing a necessary psychological separation between the surveys.

#### *Survey Participants*

The two-part survey was distributed to Drew University students actively enrolled in classes in spring 2026. The survey was designed to automatically exclude minors by requiring all participants to confirm that they are at least 18 years of age before proceeding to the survey questions. The recruitment for this phase was conducted over the official Drew University email. The participants were informed that they will not be financially compensated for their involvement and that their participation is completely voluntary. Additionally, the second survey was distributed only to the participants of the first survey to ensure that the results are comparable within the same sample.

#### *Minimizing Risks*

Taking the surveys carried a minimal risk of temporary psychological discomfort for the participating Drew University students as they were asked to self-reflect and report their emotional attachments and feelings towards the university. The study took all the necessary measures to minimize the risks by informing participants through the consent form (see Appendix A: Consent Form) that their participation is voluntary and they have the right to skip questions or withdraw at any time without penalties. The consent was collected digitally at the beginning of the first survey. A digital consent form given to the participants listed the study's purpose, its voluntary nature, their right to stop answering at any time, the confidentiality of the data collection, and confirmation that they are over 18 years old. All participating students were required to actively check off the box to confirm their consent to participate in the study before they were able to proceed to the survey questions.

### *Confidentiality*

The consent form emphasized that the participant data are confidential for the duration of the study and their collected emails will not be included in the final data set. Collecting the participating student emails was a necessary measure that provided a contact point for the second round of surveying as well as enabled the study to establish predictive relationships by comparing results from the same student email. After including the data from the second survey in the dataset and matching the responses from the same student emails, all emails were removed from the final dataset. The email list was also deleted immediately after the debriefing form was sent, destroying the link and ensuring all final data were truly anonymous to protect the privacy of the participating students.

### *Debriefing*

The debriefing form sent after the second survey disclosed the constructs used in this research and provided the undisclosed details of the study for the participating students (see Appendix B: Debriefing Form). The debriefing form was necessary since the consent form did not provide participants with all details on what constructs are used and how they are going to be compared in the study. Specifically, participants were not informed that the study is comparing their level of parasocial relationship to their brand attachment. Such aspects of the research were withheld to preserve the validity of the collected data and reduce social desirability bias. This ensured that participants did not consciously or subconsciously exaggerate the relationship in their self-reported answers, which would lead to the distortion of the statistical results.

## **Methods and Measures**

### *Parasocial Relationships*

The first survey asking students to self-report their parasocial relationships with Drew University was conducted using a 9-item scale developed by Chung and Cho (2017). It is measured on a 7-point answer scale ranging from 1 – strongly disagree to 7 – strongly agree. The scale measures parasocial relationships in terms of two main attributes: friendship and understanding or identification. The questions were adapted to the Drew University context to ensure that the collected data presents results relevant to this study (see Appendix D: Survey Questions, Survey one: Parasocial relationships).

### *Demographics*

At the end of the first survey, students were asked to provide their demographic data, including their gender, class year, living situation, primary Drew University news source, major, and financial aid situation (see Appendix D: Survey Questions, Demographic Variables). All of the questions were optional, allowing participants to skip any of the questions or withdraw at any point. The demographic questions consisted of multiple-choice, dichotomous and open-ended questions, providing additional variables for multiple regression analysis.

### *Brand Attachment*

The second survey, aired one month after the first one, measured university-brand attachment using a validated 4-item parsimonious version of the two-factor brand attachment scale developed by Park et al. (2010). The scale is measured on an 11-point answer scale ranging from 0 – not at all to 10 – completely. This scale examines brand attachment in terms of brand-self connection and brand prominence, which Park et al. (2010) determined as the main components

to measure the emotional attachment to the brand (see Appendix D: Survey Questions, Survey two: Brand Attachment).

### *Attention Check*

Both surveys included an attention check question at the very end as a part of the *instructional manipulation check* (IMC) procedure described by Oppenheimer et al. (2009). The IMC ensures the quality of data collection, providing insight as to whether participants selected answers thoughtfully or rather randomly. The attention check question was a required question so that participants were not able to skip it since completion of this question is necessary to ensure the quality of the collected data. The participants who failed to select the correct option were disqualified from the study. As seen in the Appendix D: Survey Questions, the attention check question was adapted to the specific answer scales of each survey to blend in with the actual survey questions (see Attention Check Questions).

### **Sample Demographics**

In summary, the data collection process consisted of two surveys separated by one month to prevent social desirability bias. The first survey containing questions on parasocial relationships with Drew University and demographic questions was sent to the available Drew University student emails (see Appendix D: Survey Questions, Survey one: Parasocial relationships). As a result, over the span of a few weeks the study collected 206 responses to the first survey. Out of the 206 respondents, nine failed the attention check question at the end of the survey and were disqualified, resulting in 197 valid responses.

After one month that served as a psychological separation, students who submitted valid responses to the first survey were asked to fill out a follow-up survey on brand attachment (see

Appendix D: Survey Questions, Survey two: Brand Attachment). Out of 197 students who received a follow-up email, 137 completed the second survey. Two students were removed from the final dataset due to failing the attention check, which meant that their responses could be random. The final dataset was compiled out of the 135 remaining valid responses.

### *The Final Sample Demographics*

The final sample of 135 students consisted of students of diverse genders across different class years and living and financial circumstances. The responses were split between students of different class years (see Graph E1). As seen in Table E1, the biggest number of responses was received from Juniors (41 responses, 30%), followed by Seniors (36 responses, 27%), Sophomores (32 responses), and Freshmen (23 responses, 17%). Additionally, two respondents were Drew University graduate students and one was a recent graduate. In the final sample 68 students (50%) identified as female, 57 (42%) as male, and eight (6%) are gender diverse (see Graph E2). Moreover, 83 students (61%) are campus residents and 51 (38%) are commuting (see Graph E3). Respondents also reported different financial situations with 74 students (55%) receiving financial aid either from Drew University or government and 60 students (44%) not receiving financial aid (see Graph E4).

The sample population spanned over different majors that were grouped into major categories to facilitate data analysis (see Table E5). The largest number of responses were received from students pursuing Business and Economics related majors (38 respondents, 28%). 33 students (24%) are pursuing STEM majors, 28 (21%) Social Sciences, 23 (17%) Arts and Humanities, and 7 students (5%) have not declared a major yet (see Graph E5). Moreover, students in the final sample have different sources for receiving updates from Drew University (see Table E6). The

most popular way of receiving news and updates from the university is the official university email (80 respondents, 59%). However, 26 students (19%) mainly get Drew University news through social media, 23 (17%) through word of mouth, two students through the official website, two through the mix of different channels and one student through the Acorn school newspaper (see Graph E6).

### *Demographic Comparison*

Although the final sample appears fairly diverse, the statistical test was conducted to discover whether the difference in the number of respondents between the first and the second survey had any significant influence on the student demographic. To facilitate the analysis, a new column was created, marking responses from 135 students who completed both surveys as “Completed” the rest of the responses were marked as “Incomplete.”

When looking at the corresponding percentages of “Incomplete” and “Completed” categories it seems like the sample population did not change by more than 4% in certain categories. For example, Juniors were the largest group to respond to the first survey, comprising 32% of 197 responded students. Similarly, in the final sample Juniors remained the largest group to respond amongst all class years, comprising 30% of 135 students, a 2% decrease from the initial demographic (see Table F1, Table F1.1). The percentage of Seniors in the final sample also decreased by 2%, while the percentage of Sophomores and Freshmen increased by 2%. As for the gender, the final sample consists of 3% fewer female-identifying students, 2% more male-identifying, and 1% more gender non-conforming than the “Incomplete” sample (see Table F2, Table F2.1). The living situation results also shifted by 3%, increasing the number of responses from commuters in the final sample (see Table F3, Table F3.1). Similarly, the number of students

who receive financial aid increased by 2% (see Table F4, Table F4.1). There was a 4% decrease in the responses from Business and Economics majors, leading to 1% increases in other major categories (see Table F5, Table F5.1). Additionally, there was a slight (1%) increase in the percentage of respondents who prefer to receive Drew University news through email, causing a small decrease of the percentage of those who prefer the university's social media (see Table F6, Table F6.1).

While the population demographic seemed to have shifted slightly, within no more than a 4% margin, there was a statistically significant decrease in the mean parasocial relationship scores in the final sample. An independent samples t-test was conducted to identify whether the difference in mean scores was significant (see Table G1). To conduct the t-test, responses from students who completed both surveys were marked as "1" and those that only completed the first survey as "0," creating a binary variable. The mean score for parasocial relationships of students who completed both surveys was 3.96, while the mean score of those who only completed the first survey was 4.39. The independent samples t-test revealed that this difference in the mean scores is statistically significant since  $t(115) = 2.76$ ,  $p = .007 < .05$  significance cutoff. Therefore, the composite parasocial relationship score of those who only completed the first survey ( $M = 4.39$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ) was significantly higher than a mean composite parasocial relationship score of those who completed both surveys ( $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ). This means that the final analysis results may be skewed towards students with a weaker parasocial bond with Drew University than the initial sample.

### **Survey results**

The hypothesis of this study is that students' parasocial relationships with Drew University can predict their brand attachment. Initially, the compiled final dataset was analyzed using linear regression analysis to test whether parasocial relationship scores can predict brand attachment scores. The sample size was found to be sufficient to be able to conclude meaningful results, and overall linear regression analysis displayed statistical significance.

#### *Linear Regression Analysis*

The minimal sample size for a linear regression analysis is generally measured through Green's (1991) rule of thumb:  $N \geq 50 + 8m$ , where  $N$  is the sample size and  $m$  is the number of predictors. In this study, the hypothesized predictor is parasocial relationship, meaning the number of predictors is  $m = 1$ , so  $N \geq 50 + 8 = 58$ . Using Green's (1991) rule of thumb, the minimal sample for this study is 58. The final sample after excluding respondents that did not pass the attention check was 135, which is more than double a minimal requirement, allowing us to proceed with the analysis.

The results of the regression line analysis of the mean parasocial relationship and brand attachment scores are statistically significant with  $p < .001$  (see Table H1). Supporting the hypothesis, students' parasocial relationship towards Drew University is a significant predictor of brand attachment. As seen on Graph H1, the regression line slope has a 0.75 coefficient, indicating the positive relationship between the mean tested scores. For every 1-point increase in students' reported parasocial relationship score, their brand attachment towards Drew University tends to increase by 0.75 points. This means that when students' social media relationship with Drew grows stronger, their attachment to the university brand also increases.

Moreover, the effect size  $R^2 = .14$ , meaning that 14% of the difference in how attached students feel towards Drew University can be explained by their parasocial relationship. While there are other variables that may influence how attached Gen Z students feel towards Drew University, the regression analysis shows that the parasocial bond created through social media remains a key driver in these relationships, and the stronger the parasocial relationship gets, the stronger students' attachment to Drew grows.

### **Demographic comparison**

The parasocial relationship mean scores were found to predict brand attachment, validating the hypothesis. While the hypothesis was confirmed, the question of whether belonging to any demographic group had significant influence on the study results was still open. A series of multiple regression analyses were conducted to cross-check the influence of demographic variables on brand attachment.

#### *Class year*

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to compare the influence of the class year on determining student brand attachment (see Table H2). Juniors were selected as a reference group for regression analysis as they are the largest respondent group in the category (30% of all responses) (see Table E1). Recent graduates and graduate students were grouped together under "Other" as the smallest group of respondents. The overall model is statistically significant with  $p < .001$ ,  $f(5) = 6.17$ . The  $R^2 = .19$ , meaning 19% of the differences in student attachment to Drew University can be explained by their parasocial bond and class year.

Moreover, the results indicated that seniors have significantly higher brand attachment scores than juniors ( $p = .03$ ). The coefficient ( $B = 0.88$ ) explains that senior Drew University

attachment scores are 0.88 higher than junior scores. The reported parasocial relationship score remained as a key predictor of brand attachment ( $p < .001$ ), and no significant differences were detected between juniors and freshmen ( $p = .71$ ), sophomores ( $p = .49$ ), or recent graduates and graduate students ( $p = .28$ ). The multiple regression analysis suggests that brand attachment significantly increases in the final year of studies or as students are nearing graduation.

### *Living Situation*

Another multiple regression analysis was conducted to see whether living on campus or commuting had significant influence on students' attachment to Drew University (see Table H3). Prior to the analysis the collected data on student campus residency was binary coded, and commuters were selected as a reference group (see Table E3) The overall model was highly statistically significant with  $p < .001$ ,  $f(2) = 12.84$ , which signified that combined parasocial relationship scores and living situation are strong predictors of student attachment.  $R^2 = 0.16$ , meaning this regression model can be used to explain 16% of differences in student-university attachment.

As seen in Table H3, when looking at the significance of individual variables, parasocial relationships remain a strong predictor with  $p < .001$ . Compared to commuters living on campus ( $p = .06$ ) is not a significant predictor of Drew University brand attachment on an  $\alpha = .05$  significance level. However, since the p-value is between the .05 and .10 significance level, we can conclude that there is a tendency for students living on campus to feel more attached to Drew. Students who live on campus on average reported higher mean scores ( $M = 5.39$ ) than those who live off campus ( $M = 5$ ). However, the difference in scores is not significant at an  $\alpha = .05$  significance level, which may signify that commuters with a strong parasocial bond with Drew

University can be just as attached to the university as campus residents. For students, living on campus does not inherently guarantee higher attachment levels as compared to commuters. Instead, the emotional bond formed with the university's brand on social media remains a strong predictor of attachment. For Generation Z, growing up with online communities and staying connected through digital environments, forming relationships with Drew University on social media can have more significance on brand attachment than the physical proximity to the campus.

#### *Financial Aid*

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the influence of financial aid status on the reported brand attachment to the university (see Table H4). Students not receiving the aid were assigned as the reference group (see Table E4). The overall model with parasocial relationship and financial aid variables as predictors was statistically significant with  $p < .001$ ,  $f(2) = 10.82$ ,  $R^2 = .14$ . However, the only significant predictor in the model was parasocial relationship ( $p < .001$ ). The regression results indicate that receiving financial aid was not a significant predictor of brand attachment ( $p = .99$ ). The coefficient is close to 0, meaning there is little difference between the self-reported scores of those who get financial aid from Drew and those who don't. Therefore, Drew University brand attachment does not depend on students' financial situation and the financial relationship between the student and the university but rather on the emotional parasocial bond.

#### *Gender*

To determine whether gender has a significant influence on brand attachment scores, a multiple regression analysis was conducted with the variables: parasocial relationship, identifying as male, and nonconforming (see Table H5). Female-identifying students, as the largest group

within the gender variable (50% of all respondents), were selected as a reference group (see Table E2). Due to the small number of responses students who did not identify with a traditional binary gender were grouped together for the statistical analysis. Although the overall model with parasocial relationships and gender was highly significant with  $p < .001$ ,  $f(3) = 7.45$ ,  $R^2 = .14$ , gender variables were not statistically significant on their own. The results indicated that compared to responses of female-identifying students, those who identified as male ( $p = .5$ ) or other gender identities ( $p = .49$ ) did not report significantly different attachment scores. This once again signifies that the student-university attachment highly depends on the parasocial relationships with the school rather than the student demographic, showing that these relationships are not gender-contingent.

#### *Major Category*

The multiple regression analysis to cross-check the significance of belonging to a certain major was conducted after selecting Business and Economics majors as a reference group since this group submitted the most responses (28% of all responses)(see Table E5). As seen in Table H6, similarly to the financial aid and gender variables, while the overall model indicated statistical significance ( $p < .001$ ,  $f(5) = 4.78$ ,  $R^2 = .15$ ) it is likely due to the presence of parasocial relationships as one of the predictors. When compared to Business and Economics majors all other categories displayed no significant influence on brand attachment scores. For students pursuing Arts and Humanities  $p = .47$ , Social Sciences  $p = .68$ , STEM  $p = .49$ , and for respondents with undeclared majors  $p = .32$ , indicating that there are no significant differences between the scores of Business and Economics and all other majors. Thus, the impact of parasocial relationships on brand attachment remains consistent across all majors.

### *News Source*

Lastly, a multiple regression analysis model was created to see whether students' preferred way of receiving news about Drew University had any significance on how attached they feel (see Table H7). The survey results showed that 59% of respondents selected the official university email as a main news source (see Table E6). Thus, university email was selected as a reference group for the regression. News channels with a small number of responses such as the Acorn school newspaper and a mix of all sources were grouped together to facilitate the data analysis. There were no statistically significant differences in brand attachment scores of students who prefer to receive university news through email compared to those who prefer social media ( $p = .25$ ), word of mouth ( $p = .73$ ) or any other news source ( $p = .37$ ). The overall model once again showcased significance ( $p < .001$ ,  $f(4) = 6.03$ ,  $R^2 = .15$ ) with parasocial relationships remaining the key driver of the significance.

### *Final Model*

As a result, after conducting multiple linear regression analyses to determine the influence of different demographic variables on brand attachment, the only two statistically significant predictors were parasocial relationships and senior status of the student. The parasocial relationships remained the primary driver of attachment, suggesting that students' emotional bond created in digital environments is often more influential than their demographic backgrounds in determining attachment towards Drew University. While the overall model consistently remained significant with  $p < .001$ , the individual predictors such as living situation, financial aid status, gender, academic major, and preferred news source did not significantly influence university brand attachment scores. While there was a slight difference in the average attachment scores reported

by the campus residents ( $M = 5.39$ ) compared to commuters ( $M = 5$ ), this relationship did not meet the traditional threshold for statistical significance at the  $\alpha = .05$  level and was not included in the final model.

The final model was created with parasocial relationships and senior status as the variables and all other class years serving as a reference model to establish the difference in attachment to the university (see Table I1). The overall model is highly statistically significant with  $p < .001$ ,  $f(2) = 45.99$ ,  $R^2 = .18$ , meaning 18% of the difference in student brand attachment scores can be explained by their parasocial bond and seniority status with the university. Both predictors are individually significant on the  $\alpha = .05$  significance level, where the parasocial relationships  $p < .001$  and seniority  $p = .016$ . Moreover, both coefficients are positive, indicating that senior brand attachment scores are generally 0.86 points higher than non-senior scores and that for every 1-point increase in a student's parasocial relationship with Drew University, their brand attachment goes up by 0.77. Overall, the results suggest that during the final year of studies the attachment to Drew University tends to increase compared to all other class years. Graph I1, a visualization of the final model clearly shows how much higher the baseline scores are for seniors rather than for everyone else. At the same time, the emotional parasocial bond with Drew remains the key predictor of brand attachment for students.

## General Discussion

To earn a competitive edge in the oversaturated higher educational market in the United States, institutions are forced to look for marketing strategies that would resonate with their prospective and current students and turn them into loyal customers. Current undergraduates belong to Gen Z, a generation adept at living their social life both digitally and in person, which is why Gen Z students are likely to bond with influencers and brands parasocially. In this study parasocial relationships can be defined as a one-sided sense of friendship students begin experiencing towards a university brand after interacting with it on social media. For Gen Z digital interactions with people and brands can largely influence their opinions, which is why marketers have to adapt marketing strategies to accommodate the specific characteristics of this generation. This study's main goal was discovering whether students' parasocial relationships can predict their university-brand attachment.

To test the relationship between the two constructs, Drew University was selected as a common brand, well-known to the students, who are direct consumers of its educational services. By conducting ten preliminary interviews with actively enrolled Drew University students, the study found that their attitudes towards the university are fairly positive and that Gen Z students tend to serve multiple roles within the university. While going to classes and pursuing the degree, students often are involved in a variety of extracurricular activities, such as student clubs. Some students are also hired by the university as student workers. Because students are so interconnected with the social life of a university, they often get a chance to participate in the creation of marketing materials both for student clubs they are a part of and for the offices they work for. Students at Drew University often serve as micro-influencers by being incorporated in social media content

itself, both on the official and unofficial student club pages. Seven out of ten interviewed students followed Drew's main Instagram page as well as various student club or sports pages, showing that the multifaceted student role in the university marketing intensifies the emotional brand attachment of students toward the university they attend. One of the interview respondents shared that he misses when Drew University is not posting, which signified the presence of the parasocial bond between this student and the university. Other interview respondents also described Drew as a happy place, as their friend and family, all of which suggested that Drew University students may experience attachment to the university.

The preliminary interviews suggested that the main study hypothesis may be viable and possible to test on the example of Drew University. After conducting the interviews, this study proceeded to collect the quantitative data through the two surveys on parasocial relationships and attachment to Drew University. As a result, the study obtained a final dataset with 135 valid responses and using the obtained data conducted a series of regression analyses to test the hypothesis. The regression analysis test showed that parasocial relationships are a highly statistically significant predictor of brand attachment ( $p < .001$ ), validating the hypothesis. Parasocial relationships were found to explain 14% of variance in brand attachment scores. Moreover, another variable that had a significant influence on brand attachment is being a senior. In general, seniors had 0.86 higher brand attachment scores than non-seniors. The regression line analysis showed that combined parasocial relationships and senior status can explain 18% of variance in brand attachment scores for students. Although other variables were not statistically proven significant, living on campus ( $p = 0.06$ ) was close to the significance level, showing that there's a tendency for those who live on campus to have higher attachment scores.

### **Theoretical contributions**

The study's findings contribute new knowledge to the marketing academic field, specifically on the topics of brand marketing strategies, social media marketing, Gen Z consumer behavior, and higher educational institution marketing. By longitudinally applying parasocial relationships and brand attachment theory from the existing research to the university brand context, this study filled a gap in understanding marketing of higher educational institutions and the consumer behavior of Gen Z. The results directly contribute to Drew University by providing an insight into the current student body, their attitudes towards the university, the current trends and the marketing message that resonates with the students.

### **Practical Implications**

The study's findings can help inform Drew University's social media marketing strategy. Students are the most active agents on campus, being the driving force behind various student organizations, helping organize events, and spreading the word about them to the public. Students are actively making Drew's social media content both for student clubs and for offices that they work for. Students are also often incorporated in the content, and they like seeing their friends and people they know posted on Drew's Instagram. As described by respondents in the interview, Drew University is a fairly small, student-centered school, which makes it capable of building a tight, friendly community to keep all current students engaged and attract prospective students. By incorporating a brand personification marketing strategy and humanizing Drew's social media presence, the university can build a lifelong friendship with its students.

### **Limitations for Further Research**

The main limitations of this study were being limited to a single organization and not being able to control the outside variables and establish causality. First, this research is limited to a single organization, which means the findings might have a limited generalizability and applicability to other universities or brands since this study is constrained to Drew University. Following a single brand is a common practice in marketing research. Researchers Thomson et al. (2005) suggested that using a single brand well known by all participants is beneficial since keeping the brand consistent helps control for other external variables that could appear if each participant selected their own brand. However, exploring the relationships between parasocial relationships and brand attachment more extensively could help establish the generalizability of findings. Using the example of Drew University, this study sets a good foundation for a series of future research that could replicate this study but span other universities, including both public and private, as well as commercial brands and other organizations. More extensive research could help prove that the statistical significance of this study was not just a single case but a part of a bigger research opportunity.

Second, since this research is designed as an interview and survey study instead of an experiment, there is no way to control for any potential outside variables, which makes it impossible to establish the causal relationships between the variables. Although the study design cannot establish the causation, it established the correlation by showing that parasocial relationships can predict brand attachment scores. This study provides the solid theoretical foundation, giving other studies a basis to do an experimental study, controlling for the outside variables to establish causal relationships between the parasocial relationships and brand

attachment. Additional research may be required to see what variables need to be controlled before conducting this experiment to establish causation will be possible.

Additionally, further research could add more layers to this study by continuing to test the predictive relationships between the parasocial relationships, brand attachment and other constructs such as brand loyalty or willingness to pay a price premium. In the current era of technological advancement, it is important to first understand how consumers interact with brands online and whether their digital relationship has the potential to predict their brand attachment before testing whether attachment predicts loyalty or willingness to pay a premium. Thus, this study is an essential first step that sets the foundation and direction for future studies on brand attachment to make them more relevant to the current digitalized state of society. The findings of this study provide a crucial foundation, allowing further research to reference it as a starting point for discovering what other variables may predict brand attachment besides parasocial relationships.

## Conclusion

Higher educational institutions now strive to attract more loyal students because of the severe pressures of the competitive market in the United States. In this capitalist race universities are focused on marketing their educational offers, often disregarding their ability to act as community hubs for students. Using the example of Drew University, this study discovered that parasocial relationships and being a senior can predict and explain 18% of students' attachment to the university. For Gen Z, the current undergraduates, digital interactions with the university brands prove to be increasingly just as important as real-world interactions. In fact, independently, parasocial relationships can explain 14% of students' attachment to the university, which makes it a very substantial predictor. Sharing humanity and staying authentic in their social media marketing are essential for universities to attract prospective students and build friendships with the current students. Cultivating the digital bond into an attachment can help higher educational institutions not only educate Gen Z and future generations to come but also become a place where students can feel like they belong and have a community.

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## Appendix

### Appendix A: Consent Form

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#### 1. SUMMARY and KEY INFORMATION

You are invited to participate in a research study about student perceptions of the Drew University brand. Your participation is voluntary. You were selected as a possible participant because of your student affiliation with Drew University. The research will last approximately two months, involving initial interviews with a small subset of students and two short online surveys afterwards. As a part of the study, you will be asked to answer the provided questions to the best of your ability. There is minimal foreseeable mental discomfort risk related to some level of self-reflection involved in the study. The benefits of participation are contributing to Drew University as a brand and understanding its student body. Further details about the study will be provided to you after the study ends. The study is conducted by a Drew University business department student, Diana Samchuk.

We ask that you read this document and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

#### 2. BACKGROUND

The purpose of this study is to collect data and generate knowledge that will contribute to the development of Drew University as a brand. The study specifically focuses on the current undergraduate Drew University students. The study consists of two phases: an initial interviewing phase involving a small subset of 5-10 students and a second surveying phase that will include two surveys with a month of a break in between.

#### 3. DURATION

The expected duration of the data collection for this study is about two months. If you are involved in the interview phase of the study, you will not be required to participate in the following survey phase that includes two surveys. The interview is expected to last 10 to 15 minutes. If you are participating in the online surveying phase after the first survey you will receive the second survey in a month. The first survey will require approximately 4-5 minutes, and the second survey only 1-2 minutes.

#### 4. PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to answer the provided questions to the best of your ability. The study involves the initial in-person interview phase with select

students and the second surveying phase that includes two online surveys separated by a one-month period. You may end your participation at any time without consequence or penalty. The survey is designed in a way that allows you to skip questions you do not want to answer.

## **5. RISKS/BENEFITS**

This study has minimal foreseeable risks to your reputation, physical, or mental well-being. The primary risk is a potential, minimal temporary discomfort related to self-reflection.

The benefit is that your participation will contribute to Drew University's brand development and growth by providing valuable insight into the experiences and opinions of current students.

## **6. CONFIDENTIALITY**

The records of the study will be fully confidential. In the interview phase, your responses are audio recorded for transcription purposes only. The audio recordings will be transcribed and anonymized right after the interview. The original audio files will be deleted shortly after transcription to protect your confidentiality. In the surveying phase, your email address is required to re-contact you for the second survey. Your email will be deleted from the data set after the final data is collected. The email list will be deleted immediately after the debriefing form explaining details of the study is sent, destroying the link and ensuring all final data is truly anonymous. The published or presented data will not make it possible to identify specific participants of the study. The researcher will take all reasonable measures to protect your identity and responses. The data will be stored on a password protected database and your IP address will not be collected. You can also clear your cache and browser history to protect your privacy after completing the survey.

## **7. VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY**

Your decision whether or not to participate in this research will not affect your current or future relations with Drew University. If you decide to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without affecting those relationships and without penalty. At the end of the survey you will have the choice to submit or not submit your responses. If you choose not to submit your responses, they will not be saved to the server.

## **8. CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS**

The researcher conducting this study is Drew University business department student Diana Samchuk. You may ask any questions you have before you proceed. If you have questions later, you may contact the researcher at [dsamchuk@drew.edu](mailto:dsamchuk@drew.edu).

If you have questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to speak with someone other than the researcher, you may contact the Chair of Drew University's Institutional Review Board, Alexander de Voogt at [adevoogt@drew.edu](mailto:adevoogt@drew.edu).

**9. STATEMENT OF CONSENT**

Please verify the following: The procedures of this study have been explained to me and my questions have been addressed. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without penalty. If I have any concerns about my experience in this study (e.g., that I was treated unfairly or felt unnecessarily coerced to participate), I may contact the Chair of the Drew University Institutional Review Board regarding my concerns.

**Participant**                    **(electronic)**                    **signature** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Date** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B: Debriefing Form

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### 1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study in which you participated was designed to generate new knowledge and explore the relationships between the student's parasocial relationships and emotional attachment to Drew University as a brand. The study specifically focuses on Generation Z, which is the generation of current Drew University students. The primary goal of this research was to determine if a student's feelings of parasocial relationship, the one-sided bond formed with brands through social media, can statistically predict their emotional attachment to the university brand one month later. The details of the study were not fully disclosed at the beginning to ensure your responses were not influenced, which would have compromised the scientific validity of the data. The conducted study is a thesis work in marketing.

### 2. METHODOLOGY

In this study you were asked to answer the provided questions on parasocial relationships and brand attachment to Drew University. The study consisted of two phases: the interview phase and the survey phase. The survey phase was conducted in two separate parts to ensure that your initial feelings about the university's social media presence were measured before your brand attachment to Drew. The study took the example of Drew University as a brand to test the relationships between the two constructs based on students' perceptions.

### 3. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For more information on the topic of this research, you can refer to "Fostering parasocial relationships with celebrities on social media: Implications for celebrity endorsement" by Chung & Cho (2017). This is the source of some interview questions and the first survey on parasocial relationships with Drew University. Additionally, to learn more about brand attachment, you can see "Brand attachment and brand attitude strength" by Park, MacInnis, et al. (2010), the source of the second survey on brand attachment and interview questions used in this study.

### 4. CONTACT INFORMATION

If you are interested in learning more about the research being conducted, or the results of the research of which you were a part, please do not hesitate to contact the principal investigator Diana Samchuk at [dsamchuk@drew.edu](mailto:dsamchuk@drew.edu) or the thesis advisor Ann Mills at [amills@drew.edu](mailto:amills@drew.edu).

If you have concerns about the procedures in this research, you may contact the Chair of Drew University's Institutional Review Board, Alexander de Voogt at [adevoogt@drew.edu](mailto:adevoogt@drew.edu).

**Thank you for your help and participation in this study.**

## Appendix C: Interviews

### *Interview questions*

#### **Introduction**

1. Can you tell me what social media platforms you use?
2. Do you follow any of Drew University's social media accounts? Which ones?

#### **Friendship**

3. Can you describe the tone of Drew University's social media posts.
4. If Drew were a person, how would you describe your relationship with them?

#### **Understanding / Identification**

5. Do you ever feel like Drew's social media reflects what students care about? Can you give examples?
6. Does the way Drew posts on social media ever change how you feel about the university as a whole?

#### **Attachment**

7. When Drew University faces negative publicity or criticism online, what is your reaction?
8. How do you feel when you don't see updates from Drew for a while?
9. When you talk to others about Drew what kinds of feelings or descriptions come to mind first?

#### **Demographics**

10. What is your gender?
11. What is your class year?
12. Do you live on campus?
13. What is your primary source for getting news and information about Drew University?  
(Official university emails, University social media, Word of mouth, University website, Other)
14. What is your major?
15. Do you or have you receive need-based financial aid from your institution or government (such as a Pell Grant or an equivalent program)?

*Interview Answers 1-5*

Respondent	Q1: What social media platforms do you use?	Q2: Do you follow any of Drew University's social media accounts? Which ones?	Q3: Can you describe the tone of Drew University's social media posts (Friendly, Official, Other)?	Q4: If Drew were a person, how would you describe your relationship with them?	Q5: Do you ever feel like Drew's social media reflects what students care about? Can you give examples?
<b>Respondent 1</b>	Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat.	The Athletics, the SAC, the actual Drew University Instagram, the official one. And some of the sports teams I'm involved in.	Some of them are strictly [pause] information-related to the university. Some of them are very friendly and trying to bring attention for new students. So I would say neutral, depending on the purpose of each post.	Colleagues [pause, thinking]. Yeah, strictly colleagues.	[pause] I don't know.
<b>Respondent 2</b>	I use Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, Reddit, Yahoo, Gmail, GroupMe, Twitch. I feel like that's most of it, if not all.	Yeah, Instagram. The Drew University account, the athletics account, the swimming account. Um, I think that's it.	I feel like there's usually a picture, a high quality picture, and then the caption has something, like, well thought out, and also ties in with the picture.	Um, well, right now it's still very fresh. It's like... I'm like still learning things, things about them, and I'm also like learning different sides. So, like, what I see in here, and we're in the Commons [cafeteria] there's a lot more, like, progressive messages when you look at politics, but then, having experienced my teammates and whatnot, they're not necessarily like that. They're more, um, non-progressive and whatnot, so. So I'm curious to see what the other students are like.	Um, I feel like yes, as in the, um, I've seen a lot more of the, um, athletic posts, and there's, like, scores and whatnot, and, um, results from the games and all that, so I feel like for that, yes.
<b>Respondent 3</b>	I use TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat.	Yes, I follow Go Drew's, like, the sports page [@godrewrangers], the dining page, and then, like, the Path page [student club page].	It's friendly. I think it's, I think it's very open, like, it's easy to navigate your way through.	Um, I'd say it's pretty well, like a friend you would see on the path, but you wouldn't, like, go up to, like, you'd see them, wave, and then that'd be about it.	Yeah, I, I think that it's true. Um, I do wish, though, for some events it would be posted more in advance. Like, sometimes the Wellness Wednesday is the day of, and you don't really see it until it actually begins, or, like, a few hours ahead.

<b>Respondent 4</b>	So, I use Instagram, mostly, but I do have Snapchat, LinkedIn, Facebook, but I'm not sure if LinkedIn is considered as social media platform. I think Instagram is the only one I use for entertainment.	I do follow several accounts, like such as Center for Global Education and the International Student Service, or just the main account, because I just want to keep in touch with the news.	Well, I think it's more like friendly because the posts I see are usually made up of various forms of content, such as interviewing people, just like right now, or [pause] interviewing students or presidents, or pictures from the... what is it? Events. So yeah, I think it's more casual and friendly.	It's like a family, you know. Because Drew is like such a small community. We [are] small, so we, you know, I feel like I have more bond and identity as a Drew student, like, especially, compared to other big state colleges because I'm actually a transfer student from a state college. But in other words, you know, family. Like, for example, because we live together, we also have some issues, right, because we have no personal distance from each other, so that's a thing. But I feel like, yeah, exactly. It's like a family.	Yeah. I follow the news on like ongoing election or any kind of events I'm interested in because I am international relations major. Because they basically post, announce everything, like faculty meetings or forums in EC. Yeah, so it's very informative.
<b>Respondent 5</b>	I use Instagram and Snapchat, TikTok and Reddit if you count that as social media. Also YikYak, because of Drew posting.	Definitely on Instagram, I'm not sure about anything else. I follow the official page, and a few of the student organizations, and I actually run one of them.	I'd say more friendly than official.	Oh, that's difficult. They're a little boring, not gonna lie [laugh]. They're like my lukewarm acquaintance.	I guess yeah, because they post about the events, and I would say people care about those.
<b>Respondent 6</b>	I use a lot of Instagram, Facebook, probably a bit of YouTube too. And I don't know if it will qualify, but also LinkedIn to look at other people's jobs and stuff.	I follow a lot of athletic accounts, and I also follow ResLife. And I follow the libraries Instagram account too, and the computer science department. SASA [student club], and yeah, the student activities in general.	I think the student activities and most of the ranger pages are friendly and at the same time informative. Yeah, I didn't mention the career center also I follow. And I think their ones are slightly more formal and a bit more concrete.	I think it's been good so far. They're helpful and open to taking questions or even problems students face. So yeah, it's been good so far.	Probably, like, that's a little hard to explain, but they do address indirectly sometimes. Like if you're looking for a job, it's obvious you'd want to connect with alumni. So they have like the alumni networking thing posted on social media platform. Also like even the interviews page, I think they post often things related to international students that describe it. But I think it varies from student to student, like what they want the page to reflect. So it's a little hard to guess that. The relatability is there.

<b>Respondent 7</b>	The main one that I use is Instagram, but I also use TikTok, I would say.	Yes, I follow most of the sports accounts, the ResLife, a lot of the clubs, because of the fact that I'm a part of many of them. So I just follow most of the stuff that I'm a part of.	Depending on what it is, they're pretty professional, or they're pretty like, either like funny or catchy. Because I know that, at least for the club that I'm in, we try to make our posts as catchy as we could. Not necessarily colorful, but just like something distinct. And I feel like most of the pages have at least something distinct about each of them.	Oh goodness. How would I describe my relationship with Drew University? [pause]. It depends on the day. You know, sometimes it's like, oh my gosh, we have a really good relationship. I never want to leave, and then there's times where it feels toxic, and I'm like, I gotta go. But it's more about being burnt out, and less about the school itself. It's more like, okay, I'm always here, I'm always doing something, and I just need to be off of campus. But for the most part, it's pretty calm and collected for me. Like it's not really that crazy. It's more about the circumstances around me, rather than the school and the campus itself.	I wouldn't necessarily say they lack about like what we care about. I would say more that they just don't know how to properly I guess advertise themselves to students. Of course we get the cringy, funny videos, but then we also get the really serious ones, so there's really no in-between. I feel like they have to mesh both together for it to actually get the point across. So I would say it's not a lack of caring about what the students want. I feel like it's just a lack of knowing how to advertise themselves.
<b>Respondent 8</b>	I mostly use, I would say, email for work most of the time, and Instagram, just to stay connected with my friends and family, and, probably, YouTube for research purposes, because it's nice, sort of slow media that keeps you focused, like your attention span, and like et cetera. So that would be my top three social media.	Oh yeah, definitely. I follow like a couple of, I would say, Drew Admission first, when I was like applying for Drew University. And then Drew University itself, the official media, which is the biggest follower count. And also Drew International, for international students. And I think Drew Business and Drew Activities. Oh yeah, I do follow Drew Volleyball Club. And as far as I remember, Drew Swimming Athletics, because lots of my friends are from Drew swimming team.	I would say it places itself to be more friendly, and I would say more adequate for Generation Z. They are quite up for new, latest trends. But I would say it's quite blue and green, because that's official colors of Drew. And also, it tries to keep itself short-listed, so people would read easily the official news headlines. And it's more like friendly-official, business casual, I would say.	If Drew University was a person? I would say it's some sort of coach, like in the gym, or your lesson coach. It's quite, I would say, the tone of the relationship is more respectful. It's more ambitious, some sort of like that.	To be honest, I think it might be quite biased, in my personal opinion, because as you see, there is a lot of diversification inside of the Drew as part of the community. Because as far as I know, I was like, I've been in an athletics team, I've been in lots of clubs, so usually people try to stick by their interests. And especially when it comes to social media, they have their own team, be it ResLife or marketing team. I would say they represent the community they feel closest to, be it ResLife, once again, or any participants of certain clubs, certain athletics clubs. So it might seem, at first, quite biased, but I would say it all comes to feedback, and you can always reach out and try to change those things. But I would

					say it's a little bit biased.
<b>Respondent 9</b>	TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram. Does Facebook count if I only get notifications, but I don't open the app?	Only on Instagram, and I follow basically all of them. Like I follow the page, the regular Drew University page. I follow student accounts, the official pages, as well as club accounts too.	I would say pretty official. Just the main pages. Like I think off all of the ones you can tell where it's more official people having it, but the club pages are more informal.	I'd say that they're strong loved. I can have my... There can be bad days, but in general [pause].	Mhmm, not really. Like when I'm looking at the photos, I see that there is... I like when they use the newer photos, because it's like, oh, I can recognize some of these people in the photos. But a lot of the photos do tend to be outdated, and I'm like, I don't know any of those people anymore. As well as it just doesn't look like the campus I know. But I did enjoy the student takeovers when they had them. And I was like, okay, that shows a little bit more of what's going on with students. But I understand the page needing to be super official and things to have the right image and stuff.
<b>Respondent 10</b>	I love WhatsApp and Facebook, as well as Instagram, those are the social medias I normally use.	Yes, of course I follow Drew University pages on Facebook and Instagram. One of them is the official page on Facebook and the Instagram as well, I think it's official page.	Yeah, it's more official tone, especially on Facebook. I see more official posts comparing to the Instagram. Instagram is more fun and, you know, more videos, interviews.	Friendship and hospitality. Yes, Drew University is a place that welcomes everybody, regardless of your race, your gender or your social orientation or social status.	Yeah, I think they post a lot of events, a lot of activities related with the entertainment and academic events, as well as spiritual life of students. Yeah, I think that it's not bad, but it would be better if they would engage more students and make more advertisements. I think, 24 hours or every single day, something like that would be better.

*Interview Answers 6-9*

Respondent	Q6: Does the way Drew posts on social media ever change how you feel about the university as a whole?	Q7: When Drew University faces negative publicity or criticism online, what is your reaction?	Q8: How do you feel when you don't see updates from Drew for a while?	Q9: When you talk to others about Drew what kinds of feelings or descriptions come to mind first?
<b>Respondent 1</b>	No.	I would first think if it's true or not. If it is, I would just be like, okay, I'll look at this, show my friends and everything, see if they also agree. If it's not true and people ask me about it, I would make sure to tell them it's not true.	I feel disconnected. During the break, I don't know if it was the social media or just taking away stuff from school, but I felt like I was not connected to the environment.	Confusion [laugh]. I always have to explain where I am, what I'm doing, because it's not a known school, so it's kind of confusing.
<b>Respondent 2</b>	Um, not... I wouldn't say... no. There's this one, because I'm from California, and I remember this one post having snow, and I was like, oh wait, there's snow there. I came here in August when there was no snow, so I was like, oh, that's what it looks like now.	Uh, I haven't experienced that, so I don't know how it is.	Uh, I don't necessarily even notice.	Um, well, they, they ask me, usually, like, they're trying to figure out, like, what I'm studying, and like, why I'm going there, and like, I'll explain, um, like, the swimming and everything that I'm doing here, and, um, I'll talk about my teammates and all that.
<b>Respondent 3</b>	No. Not really [laugh].	Personally, I haven't heard anything.	It's honestly not in my head.	Um, good things. I don't really have anything bad to say about it.
<b>Respondent 4</b>	Yeah, because even those contents I see on Instagram are also produced by our students. So even though I don't directly participate in the process I feel like it makes me more feel like one of the components on the campus.	I haven't seen anything, but I don't know. I will agree or not, depends on the context.	Whenever I'm away from Drew, back in my home or in London, yeah, I will always see the news whenever it's updated because I just miss it. But I don't know... to get a sense of what's going on.	Very, at least for me, it's very student-centered. It's like school for me because I'm planning to go to grad school, but one of the strengths of liberal arts education is that they have a small class. I have more opportunity to participate in class and get in touch with professors, so that's what I like.
<b>Respondent 5</b>	No, but I feel like they exaggerate the good things, but I mean, that's kind of their job, right?	I ignore it. I don't care [laugh]. Sometimes I'll like the comments if I agree with them.	I don't know. Did they just like give up? [laugh].	I just talk about how it's a small school in New Jersey, basically.

<b>Respondent 6</b>	Not much, because like, ultimately, when I'm in school that impacts me more than posts that I see.	Yeah, I think I saw just one comment. It's hard to like see the truth of it, because it was a person who was here probably like 20 years back. Yeah, so, it didn't feel bad, but I wasn't sure if that's factual or not.	I don't think I've ever been in this situation, because I usually use email if I need to know something. So, like I don't expect it to always be in the media.	First it's like a residential school, because I know a few of my friends go to community school and stuff. Two, like it's a small community, but the interaction is also very frequent for that reason. And, like it's like a good thing, but sometimes it feels a little odd too. It can be so chill sometimes. Probably weekends, there's no one and stuff. Yeah, those are tough. But it's also very supportive.
<b>Respondent 7</b>	Um, not necessarily. I would say that just based on what people hear about certain like new changes that the school is going through, like when it's posted. Because yes, we get an email before it's posted, but then when people see it, there's kind of like that spiral of people not liking the path the school is going down. But I don't really think that it's that bad. I'm just kind of like hoping for the best in terms of things like that. But also being a senior, it's kind of like I'm graduating and leaving soon, so it's just way different than for the people that are going to be here next year or two, or whatever.	Well, I kind of just take it for what it is. I don't necessarily agree or disagree. It's kind of like I can see both sides of a coin. Whereas I think some of the criticism is actually less about the problem and more about us not being informed. Because I feel like most of the student body's issue is the fact that there's a lack of communication between the school and the students. So that's more the backlash and I would say people don't like the use of AI. So I would say that's one of the criticisms that's been happening. And then I feel like AI can be used as a tool when used correctly, but it shouldn't be an end-all. So it's kind of like one of those things where you just can't win. There's always going to be some criticism, whether it's about the food in Commons, or the in EC, or anything. And it can get fixed and there'll still be criticism. So it's just kind of, I just have my own opinions and they're pretty neutral. Because it's kind of like, yes, the school can be terrible at times, but that doesn't make it the worst thing. I still would choose Drew again over another school.	Uhm, I don't really mind or care, but that's just because I'm in the know, because of everything that I'm in, like I'm in student government. So that's one of the things I'm always informed about. I'm more informed than a regular person in the student body in terms of things like that. So I don't really care because I already know these things, or it will come to me because I'm also friends with other people that are very involved in the school life. So it doesn't really bother me.	I would say, like I said, serene and calm because of the nature aspect of the school. Of course there are a lot of inner things that are problematic, but that's not really the first thing that I think of. That's something that's kind of like, eh, this is happening, but it's not really something that I'm crazy worried about.

<b>Respondent 8</b>	I would say, recently, yeah, they try to be more engaging with students, especially making interviews with like students from specific clubs and activities, try asking them personal questions. They also, I've seen some videos involving my professors or working staff from Commons, from EC. So I would say, yeah, it's definitely getting more personal, more targeted, which is nice.	I would say Drew definitely faces criticism in the food, and especially the fact that it doesn't change after lots of feedback, lots of official statements made by students. And I would say that's one of the prime examples when Drew doesn't address the criticism. Like, they sometimes prefer not to say... I would say, to remain in status quo. So I would say it's mostly food, and probably recently, it was in previous year, roughly one year ago, in the spring semester, the clubs faced like 50% of the budget cut, and many people were absolutely confused by that. So that's like two criticisms I remember. And it would be nice to see some sort of feedback from the Drew University, official statement regarding those student statements, because students are part of the university, the biggest part of the university.	I don't feel that much, because usually life keeps anyone busy. But I would say if I don't hear for more than one week or two weeks, it feels like more of a dead zone. So it would be nice to hear more from Drew, even about any small updates or any small news, be it positive or negative or neutral. So I would say sometimes I feel like posting, updating people more within a week would be nice.	When I talk to other people about Drew, I usually mention the campus itself, the education, I would say, especially personal approach with the professors and the small classes. And I also mention lots of workshops and events that occur at the Drew University or outside of the campus. And I would say the networking is quite nice of the Drew University special events and outside of the summer programs or overall programs. So, yeah, I would say it's quite nice. It's quite professional.
<b>Respondent 9</b>	I fear I've never paid attention to notice [laugh].	I don't click on the page often to notice [laugh].	[student chose to skip]	Oh, happiness, a smile to my face. This is a very happy place for me. So every time I talk about Drew, it's always from a good place.
<b>Respondent 10</b>	Not really, because they really don't post much... I think there's a lot to post about Drew University. There's a lot of things going on that you know we would... and a little bit more creative, you know? Why not have a channel, a Drew University channel? I know that there is a Drew University station, a radio station, I think so, right? We could eventually use more programs to publish or advertise what Drew University is all about, and what kind of students, the programs, all these events, all these things that are happening here would be more	I have never seen anything bad about Drew University.	[sigh] I miss it. I notice. Yes, because Drew University is a big campus, there are a lot of students, a lot of courses. I think the social media would reflect on the size, I mean, you know, how big the university is. I think the social media always gives people a real view of what the university really is in terms of greatness, I would say.	Student life [pause] and the beautiful, the hospitable campus that we have and the facilities that we have. We have good facilities, we have the basketball field, we have the swimming pool, we have good gyms, we have, you know, very good facilities that really accommodate people who like sports, for instance. Just not talk about the dining hall, which is a very good place as well to be at, you know.

	engaged or more advertised. Something like that.			
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*Interview Demographic Answers 10-15*

Respondent	Q10: What is your gender?	Q11: What is your class year?	Q12: Do you live on campus?	Q13: What is your primary source for getting news and information about Drew University?	Q14: What is your major?	Q15: Do you or have you received need-based financial aid from your institution or government?
<b>Respondent 1</b>	Male.	I'm a sophomore.	Yes.	Email.	Computer science.	From Drew University [yes].
<b>Respondent 2</b>	Male.	Junior.	Mm-hmm [yes].	Um, I'd say email, yeah, school email.	BS in Biology.	Um, I'm waiting on it to be processed [yes].
<b>Respondent 3</b>	I'm a female, she/her.	I'm a 2027... Junior.	Yes.	Social media.	Psychology and French.	No.
<b>Respondent 4</b>	I'm male, and yeah, so I prefer being called by he/him.	A junior? I graduate this December.	Yeah.	I think it's usually email, because I... Yeah, not only the page on Instagram, but also... I forgot the name of the newsletter. The one from ISSS [International Student & Scholar Service at Drew].	I major in international relations.	I do.
<b>Respondent 5</b>	Female, she/ her.	Senior, 2026. Yay!	I do.	Honestly, mostly social media. Because they stopped the whole Drew Today thing. I would say it used to be that, but they don't really send those emails anymore.	I'm a double major in English and German.	Yes.
<b>Respondent 6</b>	It's a male.	I'm a junior.	Yeah.	I think it's email. Well, they have this Path page. Sometimes I look up there if there's something.	Computer science.	Oh, no, I'm international student.
<b>Respondent 7</b>	Well, woman, female.	May 2026. Senior.	I do.	I would say, it's typically like word of mouth, then email, then possibly website. But most of the time, the website part comes from the email.	Sociology and psychology.	Yeah.

<b>Respondent 8</b>	I'm male.	I'm junior.	I do live on campus, yeah.	I would say it's a mix of weekly email updates because they try to keep a lot of news in one big update, which is super nice, especially with the links. And also half of them will be from social media, specifically Instagram, I would say. And the stories are quite nice as well to keep up with the university. So those are two of my prime sources of media.	I'm double majoring in economics and international relations.	Yeah, I did receive some.
<b>Respondent 9</b>	Female.	2027 [junior].	Yes.	There's a few ways. The acorn, word of mouth, and I would somewhat say social media because I don't usually check, but if I see people reposting the same things, it's like, oh, okay, let me take a look at it.	Psychology and philosophy.	Yes.
<b>Respondent 10</b>	Male, him or he.	I am a graduate student. I am doing my final year.	No, I live off campus.	University email.	I am studying... a master's in divinity studies, specifically in the United Methodist Ministry, to be a priest.	No, not from the government. From Drew, yes.

## Appendix D: Survey Questions

### *Survey one: Parasocial relationships*

Measured on a 7-point answer scale ranging from 1 - strongly disagree to 7 - strongly agree (Chung & Cho, 2017). All parasocial relationships questions are optional. Participants can choose to skip any question and can return to unanswered questions at any time during the survey.

#### **Friendship**

1. [Drew University's social media presence] makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with a friend.
2. I would like to have a friendly chat with [Drew's social media persona].
3. If [Drew] was not a university, we would have been good friends.

#### **Understanding/identification**

4. I think I understand [Drew University's social media personality] quite well.
5. When [Drew University] posts in a certain way, I know the reasons for its posts.
6. I can feel [Drew University social media persona's] emotions in certain situations.
7. [Drew University's social media persona] seems to understand the kinds of things I want to know.
8. [Drew University's social media presence] reminds me of myself.
9. I can identify with [Drew University's social media].

*Survey two: Brand Attachment*

Measured on the 11-point answer scale ranging from 0 - not at all to 10 - completely (Park et al., 2010). All brand attachment questions are optional. Participants can choose to skip any question and can return to unanswered questions at any time during the survey.

**Brand–self connection**

1. To what extent is [Drew University] part of you and who you are?
2. To what extent do you feel that you are personally connected to [Drew University]?

**Brand prominence**

3. To what extent are your thoughts and feelings toward [Drew University] often automatic, coming to mind seemingly on their own?
4. To what extent do your thoughts and feelings toward [Drew University] come to you naturally and instantly?

*Demographic Variables*

All demographic questions are optional. Participants can choose to skip any question and can return to unanswered questions at any time during the survey.

1. What is your class year?
  - Freshman
  - Sophomore
  - Junior
  - Senior
  - Graduate Student
  - Other
2. Which of the following best describes your current living situation?
  - Campus resident
  - Off-campus
3. What is your primary source for getting news and information about Drew University?
  - Official university emails
  - University social media
  - Word of mouth
  - University website
  - Other
4. What is your gender?
  - Male
  - Female
  - Non-binary
  - Other
5. What is your major?

Open-ended

6. Do you receive need-based financial aid from Drew University or government (such as a Pell Grant or an equivalent program)?
  - Yes
  - No

*Attention Check Questions***Survey one:**

For data quality purposes, please select option 5 for this question:

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7

**Survey two:**

For data quality purposes, please select option 8 for this question:

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8

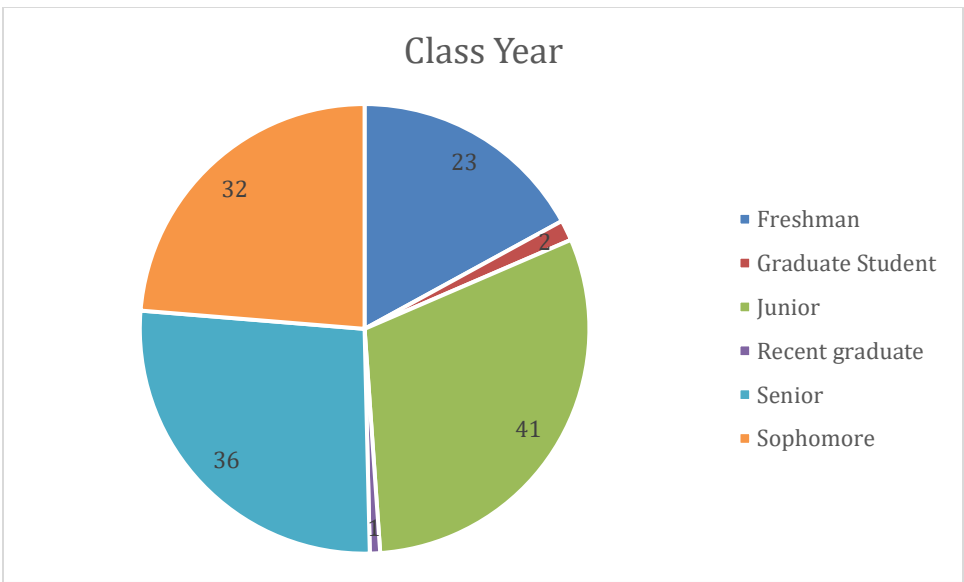
**Appendix E: Final Population Demographic**

*Class Year*

**Table E1**

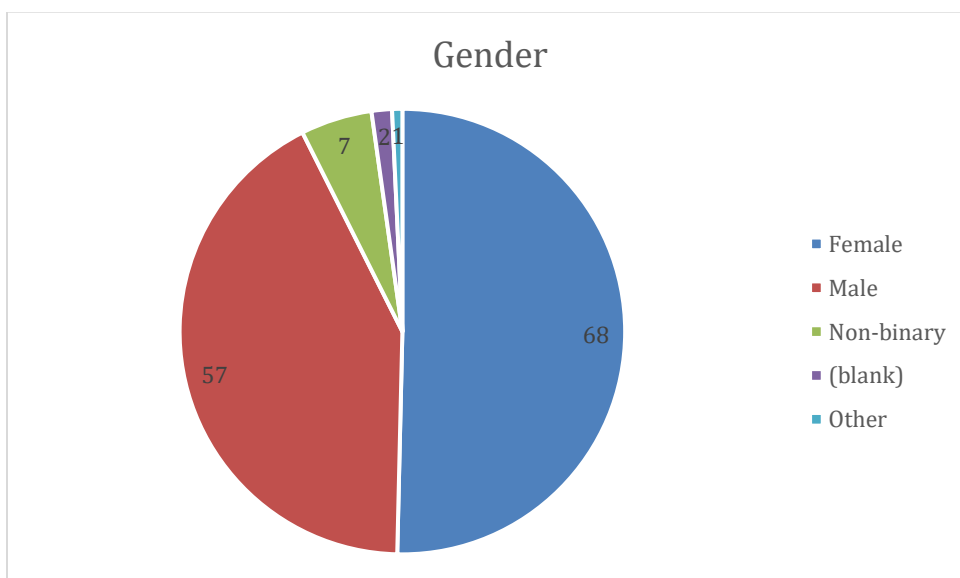
<b>Class Year</b>	<b>Students</b>
Freshman	23
Graduate Student	2
Junior	41
Recent graduate	1
Senior	36
Sophomore	32
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>135</b>

**Graph E1**



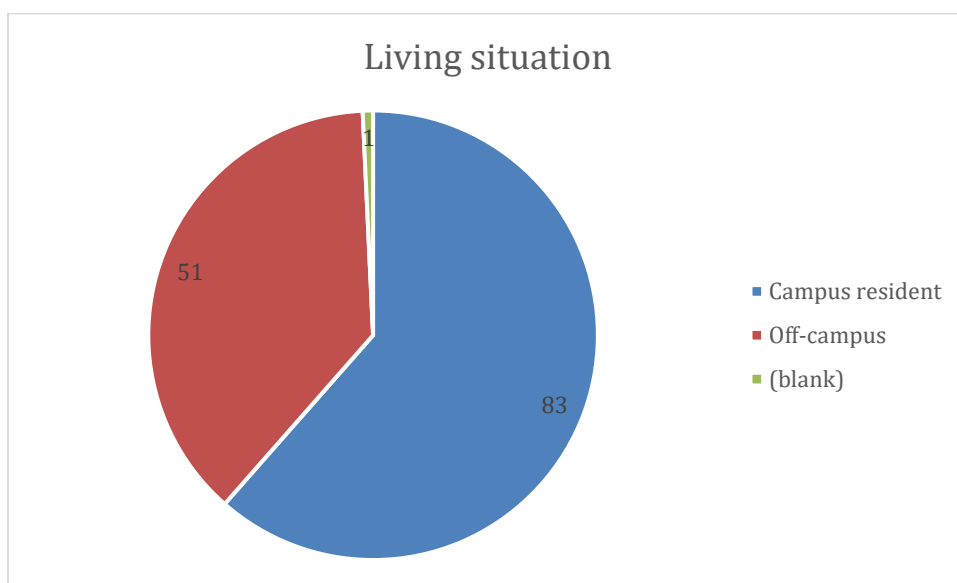
*Gender***Table E2**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Students</b>
Female	68
Male	57
Non-binary	7
(blank)	2
Other	1
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>135</b>

**Graph E2**

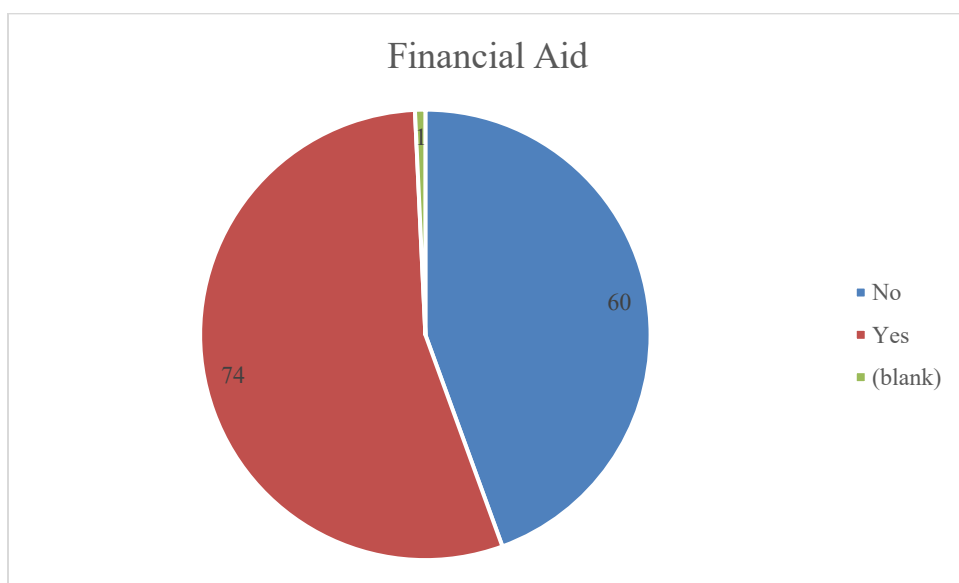
*Living Situation***Table E3**

<b>Living Situation</b>	<b>Students</b>
Campus resident	83
Off-campus	51
(blank)	1
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>135</b>

**Graph E3**

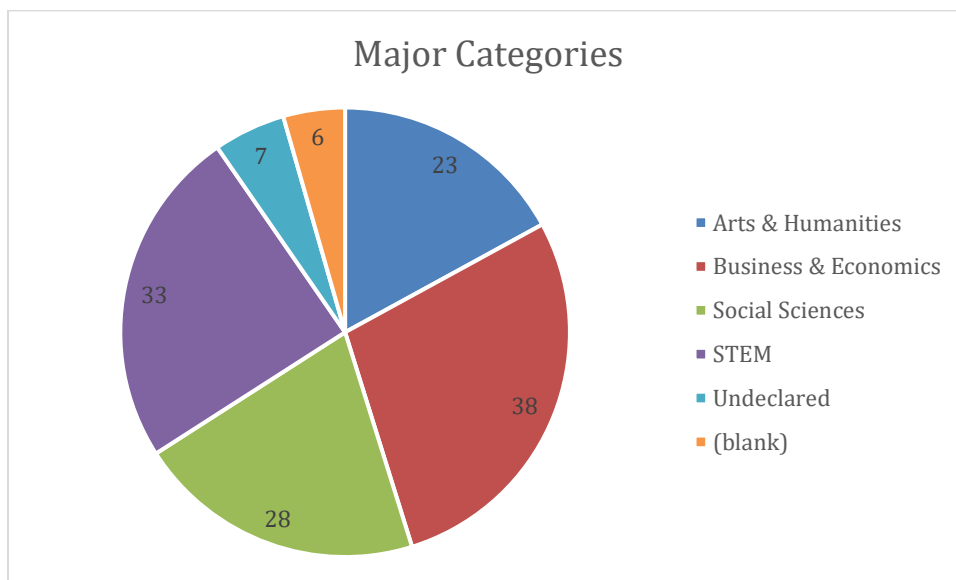
*Financial Aid***Table E4**

<b>Financial Aid</b>	<b>Students</b>
No	60
Yes	74
(blank)	1
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>135</b>

**Graph E4**

*Major Categories***Table E5**

<b>Major Categories</b>	<b>Students</b>
Arts & Humanities	23
Business & Economics	38
Social Sciences	28
STEM	33
Undeclared	7
(blank)	6
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>135</b>

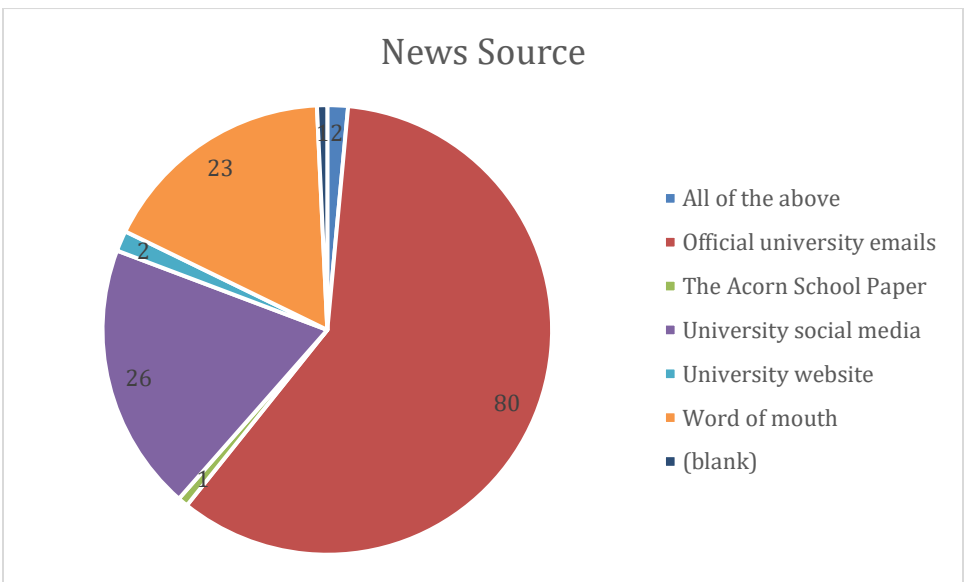
**Graph E5**

News Source

Table E6

News Source	Students
All of the above	2
Official university emails	80
The Acorn School Paper	1
University social media	26
University website	2
Word of mouth	23
(blank)	1
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>135</b>

Graph E6



## Appendix F: Population Comparisons

### *Class Year*

**Table F1**

<b>Class Year</b>	<b>Completed</b>	<b>Incomplete</b>	<b>Grand Total</b>
Freshman	23	8	31
Graduate Student	2		2
Junior	41	21	62
Recent graduate	1		1
Senior	36	20	56
Sophomore	32	13	45
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>197</b>

**Table F1.1**

<b>Class Year</b>	<b>Completed</b>	<b>Grand Total</b>
Freshman	17.04%	15.74%
Graduate Student	1.48%	1.02%
Junior	30.37%	31.47%
Recent graduate	0.74%	0.51%
Senior	26.67%	28.43%
Sophomore	23.70%	22.84%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

### *Gender*

**Table F2**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Completed</b>	<b>Incomplete</b>	<b>Grand Total</b>
Female	68	38	106
Male	57	22	79
Non-binary	7	2	9
(blank)	2		2
Other	1		1
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>197</b>

**Table F2.1**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Completed</b>	<b>Grand Total</b>
Female	50.37%	53.81%
Male	42.22%	40.10%
Non-binary	5.19%	4.57%
(blank)	1.48%	1.02%
Other	0.74%	0.51%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

*Living situation***Table F3**

<b>Living Situation</b>	<b>Completed</b>	<b>Incomplete</b>	<b>Grand Total</b>
Campus resident	83	45	128
Off-campus	51	17	68
(blank)	1		1
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>197</b>

**Table F3.1**

<b>Living Situation</b>	<b>Completed</b>	<b>Grand Total</b>
Campus resident	61.48%	64.97%
Off-campus	37.78%	34.52%
(blank)	0.74%	0.51%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

*Financial Aid***Table F4**

<b>Financial Aid</b>	<b>Completed</b>	<b>Incomplete</b>	<b>Grand Total</b>
No	60	32	92
Yes	74	29	103
(blank)	1	1	2
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>197</b>

**Table F4.1**

<b>Financial Aid</b>	<b>Completed</b>	<b>Grand Total</b>
No	44.44%	46.70%
Yes	54.81%	52.28%
(blank)	0.74%	1.02%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

*Majors*

**Table F5**

<b>Major Categories</b>	<b>Completed</b>	<b>Incomplete</b>	<b>Grand Total</b>
Arts & Humanities	23	12	35
Business & Economics	38	25	63
Social Sciences	28	11	39
STEM	33	14	47
Undeclared	7		7
(blank)	6		6
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>197</b>

**Table F5.1**

<b>Major Categories</b>	<b>Completed</b>	<b>Grand Total</b>
Arts & Humanities	17.04%	17.77%
Business & Economics	28.15%	31.98%
Social Sciences	20.74%	19.80%
STEM	24.44%	23.86%
Undeclared	5.19%	3.55%
(blank)	4.44%	3.05%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

*News source*

**Table F6**

<b>News Source</b>	<b>Completed</b>	<b>Incomplete</b>	<b>Grand Total</b>
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All of the above	2	1	3
Official university emails	80	34	114
The Acorn School Paper	1		1
University social media	26	17	43
University website	2		2
Word of mouth	23	10	33
(blank)	1		1
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>197</b>

**Table F6.1**

<b>News Source</b>	<b>Completed</b>	<b>Grand Total</b>
All of the above	1.48%	1.52%
Official university emails	59.26%	57.87%
The Acorn School Paper	0.74%	0.51%
University social media	19.26%	21.83%
University website	1.48%	1.02%
Word of mouth	17.04%	16.75%
(blank)	0.74%	0.51%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

**Appendix G: T-Test***T-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances***Table G1**

	<i>Incomplete</i>	<i>Completed</i>
Mean	4.388184844	3.962962963
Variance	1.030288669	0.968280703
Observations	62	135
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	115	
t Stat	2.756882792	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.003394367	
t Critical one-tail	1.65821183	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.006788734	
t Critical two-tail	1.980807541	

## Appendix H: Regression Analyses

### *Parasocial Relationship*

**Table H1**

<i>Regression Statistics</i>	
Multiple R	0.3752419
R Square	0.1408065
Adjusted R Square	0.1343464
Standard Error	1.8260551
Observations	135

ANOVA					
	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>
Regression	1	72.679355	72.67935	21.79632	0.000007
Residual	133	443.48546	3.334477		
Total	134	516.16481			

	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Lower 95%</i>	<i>Upper 95%</i>	<i>Lower 95.0%</i>	<i>Upper 95.0%</i>
Intercept	2.2710277	0.654453	3.470112	0.000701	0.976544	3.565511	0.976543	3.565511
Parasocial relationship	0.7484323	0.160310	4.668653	0.000007	0.431345	1.065519	0.431345	1.065519



Intercept	1.8564181	0.6934316	2.677146546	0.008390201	0.4844466	3.2283896	0.484447	3.22839
Parasocial Relationship	0.789613	0.1586587	4.976802667	0.0000	0.4757029	1.1035231	0.475703	1.103523
Freshman	-0.170965	0.4683898	-0.36500647	0.715704307	-1.0976859	0.7557553	-1.09769	0.755755
Sophomore	0.3022389	0.424334	0.712266621	0.477585941	-0.5373163	1.1417942	-0.53732	1.141794
Senior	0.8808574	0.4108349	2.144066956	0.033903052	0.0680106	1.6937043	0.068011	1.693704
Other	-1.169897	1.076807	-1.0864505	0.279305694	-3.3003864	0.9605915	-3.30039	0.960591

*Living situation*

**Table H3**

<i>Regression Statistics</i>	
Multiple R	0.4035968
R Square	0.1628904
Adjusted R Square	0.1502069
Standard Error	1.8092493
Observations	135

<i>ANOVA</i>					
	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>
Regression	2	84.078276	42.039138	12.842719	0.00001
Residual	132	432.08654	3.27338287		
Total	134	516.16481			

	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Lower 95%</i>	<i>Upper 95%</i>	<i>Lower 95.0%</i>	<i>Upper 95.0%</i>
Intercept	1.744645	0.7071278	2.46722727	0.014897	0.345876313	3.1434137	0.3458763	3.1434137
Parasocial Relationship	0.7878074	0.1602301	4.91672573	0.0000	0.470856459	1.1047584	0.4708565	1.1047584

Camplus								
Resident	0.6023609	0.3227924	1.86609376	0.0642474	-0.03615439	1.2408761	-0.036154	1.2408761

### *Financial aid*

**Table H4**

<i>Regression Statistics</i>	
Multiple R	0.3752422
R Square	0.1408067
Adjusted R Square	0.1277886
Standard Error	1.8329587
Observations	135

ANOVA					
	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>
Regression	2	72.679476	36.339738	10.816243	0.00004
Residual	132	443.48534	3.359737		
Total	134	516.1648			

	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Lower 95%</i>	<i>Upper 95%</i>	<i>Lower 95.0%</i>	<i>Upper 95.0%</i>
Intercept	2.269724	0.6920439	3.279739	0.001328	0.90079272	3.638655	0.900792	3.638655
Parasocial Relationship	0.748498	0.1612899	4.640699	0.0000	0.42945061	1.067545	0.429450	1.067545
Receiving Aid	0.0019033	0.3177213	0.005990	0.995229	0.62658088	0.630387	-0.626581	0.630387

### *Gender*

**Table H5**

<i>Regression Statistics</i>	
Multiple R	0.3817875
R Square	0.1457617
Adjusted R Square	0.1261989
Standard Error	1.8346283
Observations	135

ANOVA					
	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>
Regression	3	75.237039	25.07901	7.450995	0.0001206
Residual	131	440.92778	3.365860	1	
Total	134	516.16481	9		

	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Lower 95%</i>	<i>Upper 95%</i>	<i>Lower 95.0%</i>	<i>Upper 95.0%</i>
Intercept	2.0832987	0.6994114	2.978645	0.003450	0.699696	3.466901	0.699696	3.466901
Parasocial Relationship	0.765117	0.1624827	4.708913	0.0000	0.4436874	1.086546	0.443687	1.086546
Male	0.2216156	0.3300539	0.671452	0.503114	-0.43131	0.874540	-0.43131	0.874540
Non-conforming	0.4731263	0.6858138	0.689875	0.491492	-0.883577	1.829829	0.883577	1.829829

### *Major category*

**Table H6**

<i>Regression Statistics</i>	
Multiple R	0.3954992
R Square	0.1564196
Adjusted R Square	0.1237227
Standard Error	1.837226
Observations	135

ANOVA					
	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>
Regression	5	80.738292	16.14765	4.783925	0.0004811
Residual	129	435.42652	3.375399		
Total	134	516.16481			

	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Lower 95%</i>	<i>Upper 95%</i>	<i>Lower 95.0%</i>	<i>Upper 95.0%</i>
Intercept	2.1495895	0.7055486	3.046692	0.002806	0.7536442	3.545534	0.753644	3.545534
Parasocial Relationship	0.7463471	0.1618446	4.611505	0.0000	0.4261337	1.066560	0.426133	1.066560
Arts & Humanities	0.3412428	0.4737901	0.720240	0.47268	-0.596162	1.278648	0.596162	1.278648

Social Sciences	0.1864073	0.4441571	0.419687	0.675411	-0.692368	1.065183	0.692368	1.065183
STEM	0.2921655	0.4230836	0.690562	0.491081	-0.544916	1.129246	0.544916	1.129246
Undeclared	-0.742816	0.7483052	0.992665	0.322731	-2.223357	0.737723	2.223357	0.737723

*News source*

**Table H7**

<i>Regression Statistics</i>	
Multiple R	0.3957
R Square	0.156578
Adjusted R Square	0.130627
Standard Error	1.829974
Observations	135

ANOVA					
	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>
Regression	4	80.820171	20.20504	6.033508	0.0001743
Residual	130	435.34464	3.348805		
Total	134	516.16481			

	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Lower 95%</i>	<i>Upper 95%</i>	<i>Lower 95.0%</i>	<i>Upper 95.0%</i>
Intercept	2.268703	0.66176	3.428282	0.000814	0.9594882	3.577916	0.959488	3.577916
Parasocial Relationship	0.724795	0.16360	4.430239	0.0000	0.4011286	1.048461	0.401128	1.048461
Social Media Word of Mouth	0.483716	0.41926	1.153729	0.250727	-0.345745	1.313176	-0.345745	1.313176
Other	-0.14804	0.43340	0.341570	0.733225	-1.005487	0.709407	-1.005487	0.709407
	0.757609	0.84367	0.897983	0.370854	-0.911508	2.426724	-0.911508	2.426724

## Appendix I: The Final Model

### Table I1

<i>Regression Statistics</i>	
Multiple R	0.4221289
R Square	0.1781928
Adjusted R Square	0.1657412
Standard Error	1.7926364
Observations	135

ANOVA					
	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>
Regression	2	91.976844	45.988422	14.310806	0.0000024
Residual	132	424.18797	3.2135452		
Total	134	516.16481			

	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Lower 95%</i>	<i>Upper 95%</i>	<i>Lower 95.0%</i>	<i>Upper 95.0%</i>
Intercept	1.9701609	0.6541026	3.012006	0.0031113	0.6762813	3.2640405	0.6762813	3.2640405
Parasocial Relationship	0.7667566	0.1575538	4.8666339	0.0000	0.4550997	1.0784136	0.4550997	1.0784136
Senior Status	0.8559298	0.349285	2.4505197	0.015574	0.1650095	1.54685	0.1650095	1.54685

Graph I1

