

“What’s Your College?”

How a University’s Name Impacts Students’ Communication

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COMM 397

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December 6, 2020

Abstract

Despite Generation Z accounting for most college students today, there is a lack of information about Generation Zs and their college experience. This study aims to determine how a college's name impacts college attending Generation Zs. Specifically, it investigates the impact of the inclusion of a religious denomination in the name of the college. To answer the research questions presented in this study, surveys were conducted.

Introduction

A cashier is checking out a customer when the customer asks, "What college do you attend?" The cashier is reluctant to answer because their university name is associated with a religion. The name of their university is Southern Adventist University (Southern). Southern is a university located in eastern Tennessee and is associated with the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. The scenario above is not a metaphor. Rather, this is an experience that students at Southern have frequently encountered.

Literature Review

With a new generation in higher education, universities are inadequately informed on how this generation feels about universities' affiliation with religion. There is a lack of information on Generation Z (Gen Z) regarding topics other than consumer behavior. This review will focus on available research on Gen Z and its relationship with religion, college names, and theories that can be utilized to provide insight on the topic at hand. Although the literature presents these themes, it is important to note new information about Gen Z is constantly being published.

Gen Z and Religion

As the demographic of university students has changed from Millennials to primarily Gen Z (Barna Group, 2018b; Loveland, n.d.), Gen Z may be less likely to disclose their college name if it references Christianity. Research indicates that with each new generation individuals are becoming less and less religious. Consequently, Gen Z is the least religious of all the generations preceding it (Pew Research, 2020b; Hout & Fischer, 2002; OneHope, 2020). Research suggests there is an increasing number of individuals in Gen Y and Gen Z that identify as non-religious (Halafoff et al., 2020). Among those in Gen Z who

self-identify as religious, only nine percent are engaged Christians, which are people who “identify as Christian, have attended church within the past six months,” and agree strongly to four statements regarding their personal beliefs and involvement in their churches (Barna Group, 2018b). Additionally, research indicates that atheism has doubled between the Millennial generation to Gen Z, even though the United States average of Gen Z who identify as Christian is nine percent higher than the global average (Barna Group, 2018a; OneHope, 2020). However, conflicting research also found that in the United States, Gen Zs are more likely to attend religious services, 18 percent more likely than Millennials (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

Social Desirability

This conflicting research may be attributed to social desirability (Hadaway et al. 1993; Hackett, 2014). Hadaway (1993) found that church attendance was 50% less than self-reported and recognized social desirability as a possible cause. Gen Z is motivated by the desire to please others and this may impact how Gen Z responds in self-reported surveys (Proceedings of the International Business Conference 2017, 2017). Self-reported church attendance among Gen Z is higher than among Millennials even though Gen Z is the least religious generation to date (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Barna, 2018b). This contradiction implies that Gen Z may be more concerned about social desirability within the Christian community than the Millennial generation and as a result is self-reporting higher church attendance.

Financial Factors

Another factor that may influence students' desire to disclose their university's name is the connotation associated with their university's name. A student may become

more willing to disclose their university's name if, for example, they attend an elite school. An average salary for students who graduated from Southern within the last five years was \$48,400 ("2020 College Rankings", 2020). In contrast, graduates from Yale University average salary was \$72,700. Other ivy league schools reflect similar numbers, with that of Harvard and Princeton bringing in over \$77,000 within the first five years of graduation ("2020 College Rankings", 2020). Among the list of graduates who comprise the *Forbes 400* and *Forbes Most Powerful*, many attended elite schools (Çam, 2017; Newcomb, 2019). Despite these numbers, research suggests that the name and selectivity of a university ultimately does not impact a graduate's ability to get a specific job (Thompson, 2018; Dale & Krueger, 1999; Bernick, 2014). Even with the numerous studies on elite institutes and wages, there is no notable information on how colleges that include denominations within their names impact graduates' earnings.

Co-Cultural Theory

In addition to looking at the factors discussed above, the co-cultural theory can be applied to facilitate better understand of how students at Southern communicate about their university name. The co-cultural theory, developed by Mark Orbe in 1998, examines the communication relationship between a dominant (privileged) group and a co-cultural (marginalized) group. The theory looks at how these two groups interact with each other and their intended outcomes (Razzante & Orbe, 2018).

The Seventh-day Adventist Church identifies as "a global family of Christians who hold the Bible as the ultimate authority" (Hope Channel International and Seventh-day Adventist Church, 2020). It is important to understand that in this paper, Seventh-day Adventists will be the co-cultural (marginalized) group. However, it is equally important to

note that Seventh-day Adventists also could be categorized as part of the dominant group because they belong to the most prominent religion in the United States: Christianity (Pew Research, 2020a). Still, Seventh-day Adventists only make up about half of one percent of all Christian denominations in the United States. From the denomination's inception, many believed it to be a cult, but over time it has been accepted as an evangelical denomination (Lipka, 2020). Even though generally accepted, the denomination is relatively unknown and considered strange by many. This became evident with the 2016 elections when Seventh-day Adventist Ben Carson ran for president of the United States (Burke, 2015; Taylor, 2015).

Because the denomination accounts for such a small percentage within the dominant group of Christianity, it is possible that students in Seventh-day Adventist education seek social desirability outside of their institution by conforming to secular social desirability norms. According to Mullins (1974),

The task of Christian education is to make Christian attitudes more socially desirable thus increasing the probability that persons will share them. An attitude toward the name of Jesus Christ, for example, which emphasizes its joyful and respectful use is not a socially desirable attitude in many areas of North American society at present.

Although Christian colleges and universities' attempts for Christian attitudes to be seen as socially desirable among students, it is less likely that Gen Z students will be willing to openly share Christian attitudes as they would be considered less desirable by the majority of their peers.

Inadequate Information

In conclusion, due to the specificity of the topic, there is an inadequate amount of credible studies regarding the research questions listed below. While research indicates there are reasons for students who attend elite schools to openly share their school name, there is no research on why students would or would not disclose a school name because of its religious affiliation. In addition, research has yet to be conducted on how college students communicate with others about their university, including emotions or associations that may affect how they talk about their college (pride, embarrassment, shame, etc.). Likewise, there is a lack of data about the Seventh-day Adventist church and Gen Z, including statistical information on church attendance and the level of involvement of Gen Z within the church.

Research Questions

This study will answer the following questions:

RQ1: How does including the word "Adventist" within Southern Adventist University's name impact how current students feel about the university?

RQ2: How do current students communicate with non-Adventists outside the university about the name of their university, both verbally and through university branded merchandise?

RQ3: How does displaying the word "Adventist" impact whether students use branded university merchandise?

Methods

Participants

Participants will include students born after 1996 who currently attend Southern. Students who were born before 1997 will be excluded from this study. The participants will be of varied majors, varied ethnic backgrounds, and varied class standings. All participants will be volunteers. A small number of students will be recruited randomly for a focus group.

Materials

The anticipated materials include informed consent forms outlining the benefits and risks of participating and the purpose of the study. Consent from Southern's Institutional Review Board will also need to be acquired. Once consent is obtained, recruitment emails will be sent to randomly selected students born after 1996. The focus group materials may include a sample survey, paper, writing utensils, and a recorder. Additional materials will include a self-administered survey that will be delivered via email. The survey will contain closed-ended questions in the form of multiple-choice questions and Likert scale questions. The survey will also include a space for participants to give feedback or add additional information. The participants will also be asked to answer demographic information.

Design and Procedure

The research design will be non-experimental. A small group of students will participate in a focus group. When the participants arrive, they will be given a consent form. After consent is obtained the researcher will explain the procedure and inform participants that they may leave at any time. The researcher will then give participants a sample survey and ask them to complete it and write feedback on any confusing areas.

After the sample surveys are completed the researcher will ask participants to discuss the survey. The researcher will conclude by asking the participants if they have any additional questions and then the researcher will thank the participants for their time.

After feedback has been processed from the focus group and all necessary changes have been made, an email will be sent to all qualifying participants: individuals born after 1996 and who did not previously participate in the focus group. The first question of the survey will ask participants to consent. After consent is received participants will be asked to fill out the online self-administered survey carefully and truthfully. When the survey is completed participants will be thanked for their time and participation.

As an incentive for participants, those who participate in the focus group and the self-administered survey will be entered into a drawing for a gift card. Participants will be informed of this incentive prior to completing any consent forms.

Conclusion

I anticipate this study will show that the majority of students' feelings about Southern Adventist University are impacted by the word "Adventist" within the university's name. I also predict that students avoid communicating about their university name both verbally and through branded merchandise. Lastly, I predict this study will show that students are less likely to buy university merchandise if the word "Adventist" is on it.

Significance of Study

This study's findings will benefit not only Southern but the Christian community as a whole. The study will contribute to the research on Gen Z, religion, and college, which many researchers have not yet explored. This study will benefit religious institutions as it will provide insight on how students feel about attending a university that's name is associated

with a religious denomination. The data obtained in this study will also provide the Seventh-day Adventist Church with information on the emotions Gen Z feels as being part of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The study will also provide Southern with key information on what attracts and deters Gen Z from attending Southern.

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Appendix A: Focus Group Recruitment Email

Dear [Insert Potential Participant's Name]:

I would like to invite you to take part in a focus group (small discussion group) on [insert date, time and location] about Southern Adventist University's name. The focus group should last no longer than one hour. The focus group will provide an opportunity for you to provide your views on a survey that will be sent to Southern Adventist University's student body. In particular, we would like to know how you feel about branded merchandise, how you communicate with non-Adventists about your college. More information will be sent to those confirming attendance before the focus group. If you would like to take part in the focus group on [insert date] please let me know by e-mailing Christina Coston at costonc@southern.edu.

Thank you,

Christina Coston

Lead Researcher

Adapted from gateshad.gov.uk

Appendix B: Focus Group Consent Form

Purpose

You have been invited to participate in a focus group sponsored by The School of Journalism and Communication under the direction of Christina Coston. The purpose of this focus group is to determine how students feel about Southern Adventist University's name. The information learned in this focus group will be used to make adjustments, including clarifications to a survey that will be sent to the student body.

Procedure

As part of this study, you will be placed in a group of 6 – 12 individuals. A moderator will ask you several questions while facilitating the discussion. As approved through Southern Adventist University's Institutional Review Board, this focus group will be audio-recorded, and a note-taker will be present. However, your responses will remain confidential, and no names will be included in the final report. You can choose whether or not to participate in the focus group, and you may stop at any time during the course of the study. Please note that there are no right or wrong answers to focus group questions. The School of Journalism and Communication wants to hear the many varying viewpoints and would like for everyone to contribute their thoughts. Out of respect, please refrain from interrupting others. However, feel free to be honest even when your responses counter those of other group members.

Benefits and Risks

There will be no clear benefit to you from your participation in this survey. No risks are anticipated beyond those experienced during an average conversation.

Confidentiality

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to respect the privacy of other focus group members by not disclosing any content discussed during the study. Researchers within the School of Journalism and Communication will analyze the data, but — as stated above — your responses will remain confidential, and no names will be included in any reports.

Contact

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, please contact:

Lead Researcher: Christina Coston

Email: costonc@southern.edu

Sponsor of the study: Dr. Rachel Williams-Smith

Email: rwilliamssmith@southern.edu

I understand this information and agree to participate fully under the conditions stated above.

Sign name: _____ Date: _____

Print name: _____

Adapted from Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment, Clemson University

Appendix C: Focus Group Sample Survey

Demographic questions

1. What is your date of birth?
2. What gender do you identify as?
3. Please specify your ethnicity (select all that apply).
4. Where is your primary residence located?
5. How long have you attended Southern Adventist University?
6. Are you married?
7. Are you a full or part time student?
8. Do you identify as Seventh-day Adventist?

Likert questions

Please answer the following questions on a scale from one to seven, with one being the least.

9. How much do you like Southern Adventist University's name?
10. How frequently do you use Southern Adventist University branded merchandise (clothing, stickers, pins, cups, bags, etc.) outside of the school setting?
11. How much did the word "Adventist" in Southern Adventist University's name impact your decision to attend?

Multiple choice questions

12. Which hoodie are you more likely to purchase? (Insert picture of hoodie that says Southern v Southern Adventist University)
13. Why did you select this hoodie?

14. When someone I know well asks me what college, school, or university I attend, I respond by...

- a. I go to a private university
- b. I go to a university in Tennessee
- c. I go to a Christian university
- d. I go to Southern Adventist University

15. When someone I somewhat know asks me what college, school, or university I attend, I respond by...

- a. I go to a private university
- b. I go to a university in Tennessee
- c. I go to a Christian university
- d. I go to Southern Adventist University

16. When someone I don't know asks me what college, school, or university I attend, I respond by...

- a. I go to a private university
- b. I go to a university in Tennessee
- c. I go to a Christian university
- d. I go to Southern Adventist University

Likert Questions

On a scale from one to seven, with one being the least me, answer the following questions

1. When talking about my university I avoid using the word "Adventist"
2. I would rather wear something that said "Southern" instead of "Southern Adventist University"

3. I feel like the ability to get hired at future jobs may be negatively impacted by graduating from a school with the word "Adventist" in its name
4. I wish the word Adventist were not included in my university's name
5. When talking about my university I disclose its full name
6. I would rather have a bumper sticker that said "Southern Adventist University" instead of "Southern"
7. I like the word Adventist in my university's name
8. By including the word "Adventist" in my university's name I believe my ability to get hired will be positively impacted

Focus Group specific questions

1. Was the length of the survey appropriate?
2. Did you feel like this survey was applicable to you?
3. What were some of the strengths of this survey?
4. What were some of the weaknesses of this survey?
5. What are your overall thoughts of this survey?
6. In this survey we are trying to best identify how students feel about Southern Adventist University's name. If you were to add a question, what would it be?
7. Does anyone have any questions regarding the survey? (Answer questions and then thank and dismiss participants.)

Appendix D: Self-Administered Survey Recruitment Email

Dear Prospective Participant,

My name is Christina Coston. I am a student from the School of Journalism and Communication at Southern Adventist University. I am conducting an anonymous survey about Southern Adventist University's name. The survey is estimated to take 10-15 minutes. For your participation you will be entered into a drawing for one of several \$25 gift cards.

Since your answers are to remain anonymous, please do not include your name anywhere on this survey. The results will be reported for the group of respondents as a whole.

The survey is voluntary, and you may stop at any time. If you decide not to participate there will not be any negative consequences. Please be aware that if you decide to participate, you may stop participation at any time and you may decide not to answer any specific question.

There will be no clear benefit to you from your participation in this survey. However, no risks are anticipated beyond those experienced during an average conversation.

Click here [_____](#) to fill out survey.

Sincerely,

Christina Coston

Appendix E: Self-Administered Survey

1. By checking this box, I affirm that I have read and understand the information in the recruitment email and I freely give my consent to participate and I am free to withdraw at any time during the survey. (To review the information sent in the recruitment email, [click here.](#))

Likert questions

Please answer the following questions on a scale from one to seven, with one being the least.

1. How much do you like Southern Adventist University's name?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

2. How frequently do you use Southern Adventist University branded merchandise (clothing, stickers, pins, cups, bags, etc.) outside of the school setting?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

3. How much did the word "Adventist" in Southern Adventist University's name impact your decision to attend?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Multiple choice questions

1. Which hoodie are you more likely to purchase? (Insert picture of hoodie that says Southern v Southern Adventist University)
 - a. Hoodie A
 - b. Hoodie B
2. Why did you select this hoodie?

3. When someone I know well asks me what college, school, or university I attend, I respond by...
 - a. I go to a private university
 - b. I go to a university in Tennessee
 - c. I go to a Christian university
 - d. I go to Southern Adventist University
4. When someone I somewhat know asks me what college, school, or university I attend, I respond by...
 - a. I go to a private university
 - b. I go to a university in Tennessee
 - c. I go to a Christian university
 - d. I go to Southern Adventist University
5. When someone I don't know asks me what college, school, or university I attend, I respond by...
 - a. I go to a private university
 - b. I go to a university in Tennessee
 - c. I go to a Christian university
 - d. I go to Southern Adventist University

Likert Questions

On a scale from one to seven, with one being the least me, answer the following questions

1. When talking about my university I avoid using the word "Adventist"

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

2. I would rather wear something that said "Southern" instead of "Southern Adventist University"

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

3. I feel like the ability to get hired at future jobs may be negatively impacted by graduating from a school with the word "Adventist" in its name

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

4. I wish the word Adventist were not included in my university's name

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

5. When talking about my university I disclose its full name

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

6. I would rather have a bumper sticker that said "Southern Adventist University" instead of "Southern"

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

7. I like the word Adventist in my university's name

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

8. By including the word "Adventist" in my university's name I believe my ability to get hired will be positively impacted

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

9. Southern Adventist University was my first choice college

10. My parents wanted me to attend Southern Adventist University

11. My parents wanted me to attend an Adventist university

12. I wanted to attend an Adventist university

13. The primary reason I am attending Southern Adventist University is because I wanted a religious learning environment
14. The primary reason I am attending Southern Adventist University is because I wanted to be surrounded by people with similar beliefs
15. The primary reason I am attending Southern Adventist University is because I believe the institution offers the best education available for my major
16. The primary reason I am attending Southern Adventist University is for financial reasons

Yes or No questions

17. Do you consider yourself to be a Seventh-day Adventist?
18. Are your parents or other members of your nuclear family church members?
19. Were/are your grandparents or great-grandparents church members?

Demographic questions

1. What is your date of birth?
 - a. Select date of birth
2. What gender do you identify as?
 - a. Female
 - b. Male
 - c. Nonbinary
3. Please specify your ethnicity (select all that apply).
 - a. American Indian or other Native American
 - b. Asian or Pacific Islander
 - c. Black or African American

- d. Caucasian (other than Hispanic)
 - e. Hispanic
 - f. Other:
4. Where is your primary residence located?
- a. Select from country list
5. How long have you attended Southern Adventist University?
- a. Less than a semester
 - b. More than a semester but less than a year
 - c.
6. Are you married?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
7. Are you a full or part time student?
- a. Full time
 - b. Part time
 - c. Not sure
8. Please select your religion
- a. Christianity
 - b. Judaism
 - c. Islam
 - d. Buddhism
 - e. Hinduism
 - f. Other: