LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

SOCIAL CONTAGION'S IMPACT ON DECISION-MAKING AMONG

MILLENNIAL PARENTS SEEKING A

CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

A Prospectus Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Laura Alysson Farien

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

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ABSTRACT

Connections in a social network influence people in both positive and negative ways (Christakis & Fowler, 2009), and this study describes how connections in a virtual network affect school choice decision-making in a market heavily saturated with school choice options. This is a qualitative ethnographic study of millennial parents who experience social contagion across online platforms. Participants have at least one child enrolled in a private school in Shelby County, Tennessee. Social contagion is what flows between participants in a social network and influences decision-making (Christakis & Fowler). This study examined influence as the specific social contagion impacting school choice decision making among millennials in Shelby County, Tennessee.

Keywords: millennial, Facebook, school choice, social network, social contagion

Dedication

This document is dedicated to my family. God blessed me with a supportive husband who is my biggest cheerleader. Throughout the dissertation process, numerous obstacles planted themselves in my way. My best friend and mother-in-law lost her battle to lung cancer. The COVID-19 pandemic changed how life is lived and brought changes to my teaching career. The biggest change was my promotion to principal in the middle of this journey. But no matter how life weaved and bobbed, my husband and two daughters encouraged me, prayed for me, and supported me every step of the way. They gave me the gift of time alone to write and research, and that made the difference in my completion. It is only fitting to dedicate this to the three of them.

Acknowledgements

My dad has always believed in me and encouraged me to completion. His belief in my abilities spurred me along.

My late mother-in-law and father-in-law made it possible for me to return to school. To them I will forever be grateful for supporting my dreams.

I want to acknowledge the time that the professors in the Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University spent in answering questions. Their assurance and encouragement was not unnoticed.

Dr. Bryan Sanders, chairman of the board for the Association of Christian Teachers and Schools and friend, would not let me give up no matter how discouraged I became.

Dr. Sherrie Hopper, a co-worker and friend, also availed herself to me for advice in the final stages of this project.

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CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH CONCERN

Introduction

Research reports declining enrollment in private Christian schools (Hanson, 2021; Stone, 2017). As a result, school leaders need information about how parents make school choice decisions and how parents may experience social contagion across social network sites. In Shelby County, Tennessee, there are many private schools for parents to choose from, along with a plethora of charter schools, four municipal public-school districts, and the larger Shelby County School System (School Districts, 2021). Additionally, private schools compete for students to maintain enrollment and continue to carry their missions forward.

Nationwide, school choice is becoming more prevalent (Goldring & Phillips, 2008). Homeschooling, charter schools, private schools, and magnet schools compete with private Christian schools with greater intensity each year. Charter and magnet schools entice families with higher quality options than many public schools but at no cost compared to tuition-funded schools (Stone, 2017). Attracting new families and retaining current families has become a challenge for many private Christian schools that rely on tuition for operating costs, and according to the Barna Group (Stone, 2017), this trend is expected to continue. It has been posited that America's schools are developing into something akin to an economic marketplace (Goldring & Phillips, 2008). The kind of influence parents may experience in school choice decisions from peers on social media networks and how influence functions as a social contagion for school choice can help leaders of private schools. Social contagion as a catalyst for school choice needs to be examined as new opportunities and educational options for the education of the nation's children continue to unfold.

Helicopter parenting, lawnmower parenting, and hover parenting trends have been touted in mainstream media and the education community as a growing phenomenon. Parents increasingly seek to immerse themselves in their children's lives. These parenting trends also surface in the school choice movement. Goldring and Phillips (2008) assert, "One of the most important ways in which parents are involved in their children's education is through choosing the school they attend" (p. 209). Very often, this is a choice driven by geographical location; however, in recent years, other factors are found to affect a parent's choice. Parents who choose their child's school based on factors other than geographical location share some common characteristics. Three categories of parents more likely to look outside a geographical school zone include those with a higher educational background, those seeking greater satisfaction with their child's experience in school, and parents who are more heavily involved with their child's school (Goldring & Phillips). This is supported in another study which reported a school's reputation is one mitigating factor parents consider when choosing an educational institution (Atamturk, 2017).

Examining trends such as school choice decision-making and comparing school choice decisions to purchasing trends can offer insight into millennials' willingness to pay tuition for private education. This comparison opens speculation and questions regarding how millennials choose a private Christian school, including questions about social contagion across digital networks. In economic markets, this trend is called crowdsourcing. A closer review of millennials, for example, revealed millennial mothers are likely to use social media opportunities to look for reviews of products and share product information online (Fromm & Viddler, 2015). The translation of this crowdsourcing behavior for school choice decisions by millennial parents interested in a private Christian school for their children has not been explored. In addition to

that, the issue of school selection as a byproduct of social contagion has not been adequately examined.

Background of the Problem

Meadows (2012) writes, "Immersion in digital culture is the experience of being pervasively connected to everyone, everywhere, and always" (p. 169). Devices keep people more connected than ever before in history with the ability to connect to others using just a few taps on a smart device. Virtual networking abilities have become part of the ebb and flow of daily life. Virtual networking has shifted from a web of connected devices to a web of connected individuals with the advancement of technologies brought by more interactive social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook (Meadows, 2012). This has created a world where virtual communities and real-life communities are overlapping. Lowe and Lowe (2018) argue that the different backgrounds each person brings to a digital environment help develop the virtual ecology in which they interact. Looking at virtual interactions from an ecology point of view accounts for the individual experiences which contribute to the larger community (Lowe & Lowe). People, then, have become virtually connected to a network of others with some common interests.

Christakis and Fowler (2009) compare the idea of connectedness to a bucket brigade or telephone tree. To be connected, one simply has some type of connection to another person. Across that connection, some contagion flows between the two people. As connections increase, so does the likelihood of passing on the contagion (Christakis & Fowler, 2009). Connectivity may occur in real life or on SNSs with seemingly no pattern, or they may have a very linear path.

The concept of connectedness follows a particular set of rules. First, people are continually shaping and reshaping their networks. Second, a person's place in a specific network

can shape a person. Third, a person's friends influence a person's decisions and actions. Next, "[People] also copy their friends' friends, and their friends' friends' friends" (Christakis and Fowler, p. 22). Social media allows each person to see the connections another person has, which carries the risk of opinions formed based on someone's connections (Baym, 2015). Perhaps it is the transparency an SNS offers individuals which lends itself to the last rule of connectedness. The social network can act in ways no one anticipates (Christakis and Fowler). Connectedness plays out in the way individuals interact with one another on social media. The ability to post pictures of others and tag, or identify different people in a photo, presents an additional layer to one's online presence, whether it is self-initiated or even desired (Baym). Speculation and reflection bring to light the possibility of the connectedness created by social media, which holds some form of influence over school choice decisions, especially among millennials who are already steeped in the digital society.

Inarguably, the connected world today influences culture. Culture is important because "Each person's culture serves as a lens through which he or she sees and understands other people" (Pazmino, 2008, p. 171). The lens of digital culture influences relationships, and its far-reaching impact surpasses geographical, generational, and racial lines as the world becomes ever more connected. Additionally, culture plays a vital role in a person's social connectedness, and technology plays a pivotal role in creating connections across space (Baym, 2015). This is relevant because millennials, having grown up in a technology-rich age, have a digital and virtual impact on trends across cultures and space (Kadakia, 2017). This connected culture needs examination in the context of school choice decisions, especially as those decisions may be influenced by SNSs and facilitated across connections impacting millennial parenting practices.

Simply put, the ebb and flow of social contagion via social network sites could shed light on school choice decisions.

An example of connectedness and social contagion is illustrated through markets where buyers are seeking goods. One study concluded that millennial consumers actively seek product reviews online to aid decision-making (Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2019). This is relevant because it exemplifies millennials' reliance on social media to crowdsource various opinions. Cooley and Parks-Yancy (2019) convey, "Individuals can become well-recognized social media influencers, based on their product knowledge, and amass millions of followers. Consumers develop trust in the product, based on their trust in that influencer" (p. 251). The generation of parents currently making school choice decisions is likely seeking the opinions of people they consider influential and knowledgeable regarding education. Furthermore, millennials not only look to influencers, such as celebrities, for opinions, but they also seek opinions from people they know in real life (Cooley & Parks-Yancy). It is unknown who, specifically, millennials rely on for school choice opinions; yet it is logical to assume they are seeking school-choice information online.

The reputation, both perceived and substantiated, of a private Christian school is of utmost importance. Atamturk (2017) concluded, "Good school reputation was perceived to be equal to high-quality instruction by the parents of this study" (p. S603). Parents studied also reported they had identified their child's private school through their social network and peers. The Atamturk (2017) study was conducted in Turkish Cypriot and sought to gain insight on how parents perceived quality, as it related to a school. Atamturk (2017) reported that the parents he studied sought information from others in their social network, such as co-workers and neighbors, when identifying potential schools for their children. The researcher did not, however, glean information about a parent's network or investigate the role of peer reviews on social

media platforms. Additionally, it was not reported to what degree the social network or in what ways the social network provided the scaffolding parents sought to make school choice decisions for a particular school (Atamturk).

Statement of the Problem

This study sought to explore the impact of social contagion on school choice decisions made by millennial parents of children enrolled in a K-12 private Christian school. This problem is worth studying because enrollment in private Christian schools is declining (DeLaRosa, 2021; Stone, 2017). Understanding the phenomenon driving millennials to select private Christian education for their children can help school leaders develop social media policies geared to retaining current families and enticing new families to the school.

Purpose Statement

This study contributes to the literature by identifying to what extent millennials perceive influence across Facebook to select private Christian education. The theory guiding this study is the theory of connectivity through social networks, as proposed by Christakis and Fowler (2009). An examination of Facebook as a possible conduit for social contagion as related to influencing decisions was studied. The researcher sought to ascertain information and opinions from parents who are active on Facebook and who choose private, Christian schools in Shelby County, Tennessee, for their children. Drawing from Christakis and Fowler's (2009) research on social contagion, this study seeks to describe how millennial parents imitate their friends in the selection of a particular private school and the impact of influence as a social contagion across a social network to choose a private school.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide this study:

RQ1: What online experiences on Facebook influence parental decision-making for private Christian education in Shelby County, Tennessee?

RQ2: How do parents describe their online encounters when those encounters relate to school choice and decision-making?

RQ3: How do parents understand their online social network site experiences as they relate to school choice decision-making?

Research Assumptions and Delimitations

Assumptions

One assumption inherent to the research was that millennial parents are making conscientious choices regarding the schools they enroll their child, instead of relying solely on geographical boundaries drawn by public school systems for zoning. It was also assumed millennial parents have the financial means and logistical opportunity to provide a private Christian school environment for their child. Also, this research assumed parents have read, commented, posted, or otherwise engaged on Facebook to discuss various local schools.

Limitations

Limitations to the study include sample size. Due to the qualitative nature of the study and the predetermined delimitations, the sample size was not as robust as if it were a quantitative study. Also limiting the sample size was the time the researcher spent in the field which is reflective of the small number of responses to the initial questionnaire. The research is limited in its scope beyond the single private school that was represented in spite of the researcher's efforts

to include others in the area through two sampling techniques, random sampling followed by respondent driven sampling.

Delimitations

This research followed specific delimitations. They were:

1. This research was delimited to parents who have an account on Facebook.

2. This research was delimited to parents who were born between 1984 and 2002 and are, therefore, labeled millennials (Stone, 2017).

3. This research was delimited to parents whose child is enrolled in a private school for the 2021-22 school year in Shelby County, Tennessee.

Additionally, this research did not study the socioeconomic backgrounds of participants or how the socioeconomic background of a millennial parent affected by school choice decision-making. It also did not address a millennial parent's level of education attained, nor did it consider if they attended a private school which may have influenced their school choice decision-making. Additionally, an examination of marital status or religious beliefs was not studied.

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Definition of Terms

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1. *Millennial* – an individual "born between 1984 and 2002" (Stone, 2017)

2. *Millennial parent* – an individual "born between 1984 and 2002" (Stone, 2017) who has at least one school-aged child for whom they are responsible for making educational choices

3. *Social media* – Web 2.0 platforms which allow users to share information across the internet, offering collaboration on user-created content (McFarland & Ployhard, 2015)

4. *Platforms* – "different mechanisms or technological vehicles for connecting people and information" (McFarland & Ployhard, 2015, p. 1654)

5. *Social networking sites (SNS)* – web-based services which allow users to create a profile and connect with users and make connections by correspondence with other users (McFarland & Ployhard, 2015); specifically for the purpose of this research Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are examples of social networking sites which will be examined

6. *Social network* – "an organized set of people that consists of two kinds of elements: human beings and the connections between them" (Christakis & Fowler, 2009, p. 13)

7. *Connection* (also connectivity or connectedness) – the ties that connect one person to another (Christakis & Fowler, 2009)

8. *Contagion* - "what, if anything, [that] flows across the ties" (Christakis & Fowler, 2009, p. 16); for the purpose of this study, contagion relates to the selection of a particular private Christian school

9. *Private Christian school* – a school that is funded primarily by families in the form of tuition and individual or corporate donations (Non Public Schools, 2021)

10. *Digital native* – an individual who has been immersed in technology since a very young age, typically of the millennial generation and later generations (Kadakia, 2017)

11. *Crowdsourcing* – the act of asking one's peers for feedback to find an answer to a problem (Kadakia, 2017)

12. *Social share* – constitutes sharing what is on social media with others within one's friend or contact list (Magette, 2018); providing a link to information one believes others will be interested in (Baym, 2015)

Significance of the Study

With school choice options becoming broader, in part due to the internet, parents can exercise more control and decision-making over their child's education than ever before in America's history (Hoerr, 2005). It is extraordinarily essential for school leaders, especially in a private Christian school, to understand how parents make school-choice decisions and to what extent social contagion manifested on social network sites influences those decisions. Social media is a phenomenon that school leaders cannot ignore. If a school's leaders do not embrace the challenges and rewards presented by social media, someone else assuredly will provide online information about a school that may or may not be accurate (Magette, 2018).

It is conveyed, "Indeed, the *social share* is what sets these digital tools [social network systems] apart from traditional communications tools" (Magette, 2018, p. 5). Positive community interactions and perceptions are vital to student and school successes (Moore-Austin, 2013); this is true in both physical and digital ecologies. Utilizing social media to harness positive community relations is a necessary part of school administration in the current society, particularly when engaging parents of the millennial generation.

Uncovering the extent, if at all, that social contagion via social network sites has spread among millennial parents in Shelby County, Tennessee, to select private Christian schools for their child's education was one goal of this study.

Summary of the Design

Ethnography

An ethnography studies a culture in its natural setting (Neuman, 2006). The culture this researcher sought to explore was millennial parents who engage on Facebook. Ethnography traditionally positions the researcher as a casual observer and participant in the culture being

studied. This methodology allowed this researcher to collect first-hand accounts of social contagion via interviews and focus groups and compile observational data through field notes. Given that the primary setting where participants interact is virtual, the researcher also developed notes from observations during the focus groups. Coding took place in stages and was developed as an ongoing component of the research. The objective was to provide thick descriptions upon which the researcher drew conclusions and identified common threads. Additionally, a map of the social ties that the participants reported was developed; additionally, social contagion that may travel along the ties was identified.

Chapter Summary

This chapter oriented the reader to social contagion and how social contagion theory (Christakis & Fowler, 2009) was applied to the proposed research. In addition to introducing the theory of social contagion, the chapter also defined the problem and purpose of the study and listed the research questions. Additionally, this chapter oriented readers to the methodology utilized in the research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

According to the Barna Group (Stone, 2017), the United States is experiencing a decline in private Christian school enrollment and viability across the nation. This study examined the phenomenon of social contagion among millennial parents across social networks and explored how social networks influence school choice decisions.

Social contagion, or behaviors that spread along the ties connecting one person to another, has been studied by Christakis and Fowler (2009). They studied the propensity for a person to be obese simply due to friendship with an obese person because people tend to imitate the people with whom they spend time. Findings also included that when both individuals consider the other person to be a friend, the influence exerted along that tie is tripled (Christakis & Fowler, 2009), meaning social contagion flows more freely in relationships where the ties are two-way or mutual. Social connection facilitates social contagion because "networks can magnify whatever they are seeded with" (p. 115).

Like social contagion, economists study crowdsourcing to measure the influence a crowd has on a group of people in the market for a good or service (Kadakia, 2017). A parent seeking information to aid in decision-making is likely to seek information to help them make the decision (Sadovykh, Sundaram, & Piramuthu, 2015). Many parents write online school reviews and post on social media about their perceptions of their child's school, which, for good or bad, fosters a community opinion of a particular school and contributes to the school's reputation in the community. It is observed, "Technology does not occur in a vacuum; technologies are social constructions created in response to guiding values present in society and its institutions" (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 34). Beyond theoretical constructs related to the proposed

research, there are also theological considerations that weigh actions of professing Christian parents toward a private school, such as using online platforms to make their concerns public.

Theological Framework for the Study

Social contagion theory has theological underpinnings. Therefore, this section will first examine how the influence of a Christian may impact how a social media post is received. Following influence, factors such as self-control, judgment, and wisdom will be viewed through a biblical lens as they apply to a digital ecology. The dangers of gossip will be discussed from a Scriptural point of view and brought to bear on digital citizenship. Finally, the section will culminate by bringing together the theological strands examined and completed to review how Christ-like love underscores the need to be mindful of one's online presence and behaviors.

A theological perspective is relevant to a discussion of online activities when online platforms are considered an extension of the environment and as a place where relationships are formed and nurtured (Campbell & Garner, 2016). Lowe and Lowe (2018) suggest the relationships experienced between individuals, whether offline or online, can be reciprocal in nature. In Romans 1:12 (*English Standard Version Bible, 2016*) Paul references mutual connections and reciprocity and writes, "…that we may be encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine." Reciprocity is an essential element to growth (Lowe & Lowe, 2018) and can positively or negatively impact another. Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) wrote that human development required reciprocal interactions for normal development. He believed that to regard relational influence as only one directional was to leave out half of the equation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Influence. Influence is a powerful tool wielded both positively and negatively across humanity. Paul warned of this in 1 Corinthians 15:33 (*English Standard Version Bible, 2016*)

when he writes, "Do not be deceived: Bad company ruins good morals." Paul wrote to convey a link between denying the resurrection and poor behavior (Horsley, 1998). When Paul writes of leaven in 1 Corinthians 5:6 (*English Standard Version Bible, 2016*), he conveys that even a small measure of yeast will cause the whole lump of dough to be leavened. He reiterates this in 1 Corinthians 5:6 (*English Standard Version, 2016*) when he writes, "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?" The illustration of the yeast leavening a whole bowl of dough was probably a common adage during Paul's lifetime. Paul uses this commonly understood construct as a metaphor to warn the people of Corinth to be wary of influencers who may not have a pure motive (Horsley, 1998). The biblical warning to guard against influencers with impure motives is a legitimate warning regarding the influence parents may either possess or experience through social media.

Stetzer (2018) asks how a Christian's online behavior and real-life behavior compare. Do they match up? He offers this response, "To disassociate our online conduct from any real-life consequences fails to grasp that in our digital age, people are always watching" (Stetzer, 2018, p. 39). This is true whether we are engaged in face-to-face encounters or ones in an online context. Christians must be aware of a watchful, lost world, whether online using a social media platform or in one's physical front yard. Jesus says, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another" (*English Standard Version*, 2016, John 13:34-35). It is this love, or charity, that is the seal of the believer; the seal is symbolic of the love the world sees in our actions (Aquinas, Keating, & Levering, 2010). The command to love is an overwhelmingly critical ingredient to developing relationships (Pazmino,

2008) between school staff and current parents of the Christian school, along with parents of potential students.

It becomes even more important to nurture positive relationships because of the contagious quality of people's actions with others, both online and in person (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). Another analogy for social networks is exemplified in Scriptural passages of sowing and reaping. Researchers write, "Social networks, it turns out, tend to magnify whatever they are seeded with" (Christakis & Fowler, 2009, p. 31). In Hosea, the prophet writes that sowing in righteousness reaps a harvest of love (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2016, Hosea 10:12). Job wrote that anyone who sowed discord reaped the same (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2016, Job 4:8). Paul conveyed to the church in Galatia, "whatever one sows, that will he also reap" (*English Standard Version* Bible, 2016, Galatians 6:7b). Where influence, self-control, and wisdom are sown, social contagion across digital networks can flow freely in a positive and uplifting manner. However, the converse is equally possible.

Unfair Judgments. Christians and non-Christians alike can be guilty of issuing harsh judgments based on others' behaviors or their perceptions of others. Because judgment is a natural component of social media and social community involvement (Bradley & McDonald, 2011), examining judgment through a biblical lens is foundational to the proposed research. Not unlike society during the time of Christ, the current culture is entangled in an atmosphere that creates an environment where judging others happens quickly and easily.

Jesus spoke of how easy it is to judge one another in Scripture. Matthew 7:1-2 (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2016) says, "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you." Jesus experienced man's tendency to judge one another, given the cultural and religious

atmosphere of his day. He wanted people to understand how an unforgiving and judgmental spirit would only serve to place them in bondage (Card, 2013). In the context of Matthew 7:1 (*English Standard Version*, 2016), the word *judge* relates to a personal determination of the character of another (Basser, 2009). Basser (2009) observes, "People are quick to find faults in others but not so quick to see their own" (p. 197). To summarize, self-righteousness without self-improvement is one problem that comes from issuing judgment resulting in blindly following a crowd.

When harsh judgments spill into one's speech, much harm can be experienced. Damage often occurs when there is a criticism to impart. A measure of grace and humility is required in Scripture alongside directness and openness when dealing with conflict (*English Standard Version,* 2016, Matthew 18; Stetzer, 2018). Online platforms often do not prove themselves to be the best way to bring issues to light. Because current parents are assumed to have existing relationships with a school, criticizing from the relative safety of a digital network does not practice Scriptural directives. Jesus calls His followers to go to a person who has offended them (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2016, Matthew 18; Card, 2013). A public platform, such as an SNS, does not foster an environment conducive to reconciliation if needed. It is noted that because of the love of Jesus, His followers are also called to exhibit loving kindness in their judgments of others (Card, 2013). Stetzer (2018) observes, "When we hide behind faceless avatars or create anonymous blogs by which we lob projectiles at church leaders or those on the other side of social issues, we forfeit any righteousness in our criticism" (p. 254).

Self-Control. Paul wrote in Colossians 4:5-6 (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2016), "Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person." His

advice urges believers to remember their Christian walk is lived out for the world to see and should be considered an open invitation to live life in such a way as to draw others to Christ. A positive curiosity from the non-believers among the Christian should result from living out one's faith. Faith should be one social contagion passed from believer to believer and even from believer to unbeliever. One component of living a public life designed to attract non-believers is speaking with a measure of grace. Therefore, one must be aware of the perils thoughtless speech can offer (Bird, 2009). A Christian school must guard its reputation, both in a digital ecology and in a physical ecology, to retain a saltiness designed to attract new families to the school. Campbell and Garner (2016) underscore the power of the internet to represent a faith-based organization and write, "Technology informed by an individual's or group's religious identity can become a powerful occasion for representing religion in the public sphere as words meet with faithfully informed action" (p. 112).

A school's ability to market itself as offering a distinctively Christian flavor to students' educational experiences requires stakeholders, such as parents who profess to be Christians, to exercise caution in how they talk about their school, heeding the instructions in Colossians 3:5-6 (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2016). Stetzer (2018) asserts, "While we may not arm ourselves with pitchforks and torches, I believe that technology has increased our propensity to adopt a mob mentality" (p. 250). Resisting a mob mentality requires a significant amount of self-control and is a preventative to social contagion flowing in a harmful manner.

In Titus 2 (*English Standard Version*, 2016), Paul encourages the reader to maintain a sober mind exercising self-control. For an older man, wielding self-control underscores and gives purpose to treating them with respect; likewise, for an older woman, serving as mentors to younger women serves as a reminder of the responsibility to others in a community to act with

dignity (Koessler, 2014). Later in the chapter, Paul reminds slaves to be respectful to their masters to paint a picture and offer an example "that the grace of God as intended for every segment of society" (Koessler, 2014, p. 1915). Lowe and Lowe (2018) write:

> We are all part of a family, school, church, workplace, voluntary organization, or community. What we do affects others. What other people do affects us. There is an inescapable sense of reciprocity between those people in a particular social network (p. 107).

Current stakeholders in a Christian school's success also have a responsibility to act with dignity when they post across social media platforms for the sake of their reputation and the reputation of the school.

Wisdom. For the Christian who engages in social media, wisdom must permeate their actions and speech. Exercising wisdom in one's interactions on social media is akin to showing wisdom in physical interactions. Furthermore, the speech of a Christian should be seasoned with wisdom, having the goal of peace. James 3:17-18 (*English Standard Version Bible, 2016*) says, "But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace."

One way to reflect wisdom across internet platforms is to be slow to react. Wisdom must guide one's anger so that it manifests in a way that reflects God's love and does not damage the command to love others (*English Standard Version,* 2016, John 13:34; *English Standard Version,* 2016, John 15:12). Christians need to be careful not to allow outrage to guide their responses, even if there is a reason for biblical anger. It is observed, "Outrage is fast and decisive rather than reflective, choosing to exhibit God's retribution rather than reflect his persistent,

steadfast love" (Stetzer, 2018, pp. 80-81). Scripture admonishes, "…let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2016, James 1:20). Reflecting on what has been communicated allows one to offer a response sown in peace and seasoned with wisdom to glorify God (Stetzer, 2018). Psalm 37:30 (*English Standard Version,* 2016) says, "The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom and his tongue speaks of justice."

Wisdom, like influence, is inherently linked to love, unlike knowledge with which is often compared. Pazmino (2008) states, "Knowledge easily breeds conceit, provides glib answers, and, at best, is incomplete. What matters more is spiritual wisdom expressed in a love that promotes the good of others and glorifies God" (p. 41). The Apostle Paul told the Ephesians that his prayer was for their knowledge to be exceeded by their love for Christ (*English Standard Version Bible,* 2016, Ephesians 3:19). Love for others is integral to Christian wisdom, which is desirable not only in an ecology of reality but also in interactions in a virtual ecology. Pazmino (2008) further exegetes, "Truth without love results in harshness, and love without truth results in compromise" (p. 44).

Gossip. Daniels Jr. (2012) defines gossip as "evaluative speech among persons generated by unexpected words or deeds" (p. 212). A key element to gossip is the idea that the person or entity being discussed is not present, suggesting that the person who is the subject of the discourse is not present and has no control over the situation (Daniels Jr., 2012). This makes gossip an incredibly easy trap in which to become ensnared on social media platforms. It is easily forgotten that on an SNS conversations are being viewed by a larger community. Online ecologies are a breeding ground for gossip which can either build up or tear down one's reputation (Baym, 2015). People do not need cues to know they are gossiping, and they do not

need to be taught how to gossip. Gossip has a slippery nature to which people easily succumb (Daniels Jr., 2012).

Scripture is unambiguous on the issue of gossip. Exodus 23:1 (*English Standard Version*, 2016) says, "You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with a wicked man to be a malicious witness." Leviticus 19:16 (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2016) records this clear directive: "You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the Lord." One commentator believes this reflects the Israelites' understanding that gossip could affect an entire community (Daniels Jr., 2012). Gossip then can be assumed to be one social contagion that has a negative impact. Psalm 101:5 (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2016) underscores the clarity the Old Testament provides on how God views gossip. The Psalmist wrote, "Whoever slanders his neighbor secretly, I will destroy. Whoever has a haughty look and an arrogant heart I will not endure" (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2016, Psalm 101:5).

The New Testament also speaks straightforwardly to the issue of gossip. Paul writes to the church at Ephesus, "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to hear" (*English Standard Version,* 2016, Ephesians 4:29). Gossip spread via social media, or another online platform, is especially harmful to the reputation of the institution or person about whom slanderous information is being sown. 1 Timothy 5:13 (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2016) calls gossipers, busybodies, and charges them with saying things that they should not.

Theological Summary

In each theological strand considered in this section, influence, self-control, judgment, and wisdom, love is highlighted. Love encompasses truth. Without love, truth has a propensity to

be harsh; likewise, love without truth can be too permissive (Campbell & Garner, 2016). Micah 6:8 (*English Standard Version,* 2016) says, "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" In exegesis of Micah 6:8, Dempster (2017) writes, "This unquestionably has to do with the common people…doing the will of God in their social relationships…" (p. 178). Relationships and relational qualities, such as loyalty and steadfast love, are relevant to the study of how people relate across social media networks. This relational love for others emanates from the whole person just as the entire person loves God (Campbell & Garner, 2016).

Further, at the heart of each of the theological concerns considered in this section lies the command to love one another and to reflect God's love. Campbell and Garner (2016) argue "that neighborhood overlaps the physical and that love of neighbor is imperative in both physical and digital environments" (p. 89). Relationships and social ties in modern times define one's neighbors, rather than geographical points. Therefore, the love one has for a neighbor must emanate from all parts of a person's personality (Campbell & Garner, 2016) and across digital divides when necessary.

Theoretical Framework for the Study

This research explored the social contagion of influence as it was experienced across internet-based social networks on a millennial parent's decision to enroll their child in a private, Christian K-12 school. As proposed by Christakis and Fowler (2009), the theory of connectivity serves as the foundation for this study. Connections between people across digital platforms are undeniable, as evidenced by various algorithms on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter. Examining millennials' behaviors and trends in the hyperconnected world stemmed from

the theoretical basis of connectivity and unraveled other theoretical threads upon which a basis for the study was woven.

Social Networks

To study the question of millennials and social contagion impacting decision-making when selecting a K-12 private Christian school, an explanation of how social networks influence people must be followed by a deeper understanding of who the millennial is and how crowdsourcing affects consumers. To fully convey the importance of social networks, three key elements are considered: Christakis and Fowler's (2009) research on connectedness, the concept of social contagion, and how digital worlds have changed the way connections are made between individuals.

Connectedness. For over half a century, connectivity has been on the minds of researchers. Stanley Milgram studied connections in the 1960s, before the advent of the digitally connected world. His research revealed that, on average, there are six degrees of separation between any two people. By passing a folder from person to person, using only friends and acquaintances, Milgram sought to uncover how many intermediaries were needed for the folder to go from its origin to its target, or the intended final recipient (Blass, 2009). Only twenty-six percent of the folders made it from their starting person to their target; however, Milgram found that on average the folder only needed to change hands six times to be successful (Blass). Known as the *small world effect*, Milgram's research was the first to demonstrate that the social world is more connected than originally believed. He also demonstrated that social connections were traceable (Blass). Evolving from his research, John Guare wrote a play, *Six Degrees of Separation*, and a trivia game emerged based on actor Kevin Bacon (Christakis & Fowler, 2009).

Christakis and Fowler (2009) delve into the intricacies of connection between people and their effect on an individual and write:

> Most of us are already aware of the direct effect we have on our friends and family; our actions can make them happy or sad, healthy, or sick, even rich or poor. But we rarely consider that everything we think, feel, do, or say can spread far beyond the people we know. Conversely, our friends and family serve as conduits for us to be influenced by hundreds or even thousands of other people. In a kind of social chain reaction, we can be deeply affected by events we do not witness that happen to people we do not know. It is as if we can feel the pulse of the social world around us and respond to its persistent rhythms. As part of a social network, we transcend ourselves for good or ill and become a part of something much larger. We are connected. (p. 30)

Simply defined, social networks consist of people and the connection people have to one another (Christakis & Fowler). The complexity of social networks is that they do not exist in a vacuum and have different characteristics, purposes, or meanings. Social network ties can vary in quantity, quality, multiplexity, or symmetry (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). As it relates to social network ties, quantity refers to the number of network ties one has, whereas quality references the type of network ties, whether they are emotionally centered, or are relationships based on companionship. Multiplexity refers to the connections that are both emotionally centered and companionship-oriented; symmetry describes people that only fill one of those roles (Rainie & Wellman).

Like Rainie and Wellman's (2012) four types of networks, Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed that three dyads may exist between individuals in a relationship. In an observational dyad, one person is intently watching another person to learn something, whether it is a learned

activity or a learned response. A joint activity dyad requires more interaction between two parties, and the two parties often feel they are doing something together, even if they are not doing the same thing. Lastly, the primary dyad continues a relationship or connection, even if the individuals are not physically together (Bronfenbrenner). These connections, or dyads, all consist of some type of connection between people, and connections may exist independently or simultaneously to some extent. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's work, Lowe and Lowe (2018) argue that people exist in an arrangement of nested ecologies that may consist of thick and thin connections with varying degrees of influence.

Christakis and Fowler (2009) use the metaphor of a "commonly owned forest" (p. 31) to illustrate the advantages of being a part of a social network. Everyone in the network benefits from being in the network, and so, everyone in the network should take care of the network to ensure it is healthy. This analogy is summarized by stating, "While social networks are fundamentally and distinctively human, and ubiquitous, they should not be taken for granted" (Christakis & Fowler, 2009, p. 31). Social connections are relevant because each connection a person has with another is an opportunity to influence someone or be influenced by someone (Christakis & Fowler), which uniquely relates to crowdsourcing, as outlined later in the chapter.

Social networks impact the ebb and flow of global finance, as well as day-to-day individual transactions (Christakis & Fowler, 2009). Other impacts include how and if individuals go to the voting booth on election day. For example, discussing voting among social network ties will likely cause others in the same network to go to the polls (Christakis & Fowler). Music tastes, healthy habits, suicide, and choosing a spouse are argued to all be influenced by social networks (Christakis & Fowler).

Contagion. Social contagion is any idea or belief that flows across the connections, or ties, between people (Christakis & Fowler, 2009). Social networks often mediate an infectious following for a specific brand or service (Kwon, Stefanone, & Barnett, 2014). Christakis and Fowler (2009) posit that social networks have tremendous influence over individuals and even limit a person's control over his own choices.

Behaviors may be contagious and spread to affect others (Christakis & Fowler, 2009). Smoking, drinking, and substance abuse have all been determined to be behaviors that are mimicked by others in the social network, thereby rendering them social contagions (Christakis & Fowler). Sadly, after tracing both modern and historical instances of suicide clusters, it was observed that "Suicide contagion is perhaps the most devasting illustration of the power of social networks" (p. 121). Christakis and Fowler (2009) concluded that the spread of behaviors surrounding suicide is more contagious than the act of suicide.

Further, emotions take on a contagious quality when transmitted across a tightly connected community. Emotions, then, often have their origin in a community rather than an individual (Christakis & Fowler, 2009). Lowe and Lowe (2018) observe, "The social connections we have with other people and the interactions we create to maintain those connections make us socially contagious – for better or worse" (p. 20). Christakis and Fowler (2009) graphed the social network of happiness to ascertain if emotions traveled across social network ties and if the spread was simply between friends, called a dyadic spread, or spread to friends of friends and beyond, called a hyperdyadic spread. They found that happiness did indeed travel as a social contagion across groups of people (Christakis & Fowler).

Digital networks. The digital world and social network sites have allowed connections to become more noticeable to even a casual observer. Meadows (2012) described the internet as a

web of connections. It has also been noted, "Social networks are the conduit for both social information and social influence" (Kwon, Stefanone, & Barnett, 2014, p. 1346). Whereas upon its advent into society, the internet was a simple web of connected devices, in modern-day experiences, it is a medium through which people enter and maintain virtual relationships creating a network of users (Meadows, 2012). Therefore, social media platforms draw together people who have no discernible connection in the offline realm creating a unique community. In a social community, connectedness becomes a norm, and collaboration has a purpose (Christakis & Fowler, 2009).

Regarding internet platforms, "Community is the people who collaborate. Social media is where they collaborate. And purpose is why they collaborate" (Bradley & McDonald, 2011, p. 12). Christakis and Fowler (2009) assert that people sustain relationships through online social networking sites that they may already have in the offline world. They also have the means to monitor the relationships of others around them. Increasing the awareness of others' connections in a social network can cause the individual to have a more extensive network of acquaintances than ever before in history (Christakis & Fowler).

Online networks use the virtual world of websites, social media platforms, blogs, and other digital media to draw connections between users. Baym (2015) calls this "*networked collectivism*, meaning that groups of people now network throughout the internet and related mobile media, and in-person communication, creating a shared but distributed group identity" (p. 101). Social networks provide a level of connectivity that allows friends' friends to influence and contribute to the self-perception of oneself. Christakis and Fowler (2009) suggest that a person's friends serve as pathways for social contagion to travel along. This leads to the conclusion that individuals are not in complete control over their own choices (Christakis & Fowler).

When emotions exhibit a deep and far-reaching contagious state, scientists call it *mass psychogenic illness* (MPI). Whether MPI is exhibited through outwardly physical reactions such as hysterical laughing or inward symptoms such as chest pain, this phenomenon has been recorded as "epidemics of emotional state" (Christakis & Fowler, 2009, p. 40). At a Tennessee high school, one teacher reporting the smell of gasoline resulted in a four-day school closure. Others began noticing the smell, but it was ultimately found that there was nothing wrong in the gas lines (Christakis & Fowler). In this example, one person's experience contributed to a whole community of people to believe they smelled a gas leak. The key here is that the contagion traveled across existing ties, first expanding to close relationships (those in a single classroom) and growing to encompass many more people (the entire school).

A person's reputation and identity can be affected by the connections one has in a social network, especially an online social networking site (Baym, 2015). Because it is less likely for ties to be broken, relationships in an online world become cumulative (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Further, new ways of interacting and new patterns of relational behaviors emerge through online connections that are not available in offline interactions (Christakis & Fowler, 2009). Relational ties have changed since the advent of the internet because digital interactions facilitate offline interactions through online communications (Rainie & Wellman).

Millennials

For the proposed research, there must be an examination of the human connections that permeate the world and specifically how millennials interact within their networks. Unfortunately, millennials have gained a less-than-stellar reputation as a generation. MacKenzie and Scherer (2019) observe, "Social media and pop culture have caricatured millennials as entitled individuals who expect trophies for waking up in the morning, wear fedora hats, and eat

obscene amounts of avocado toast but only after posting pictures of their toast to Instagram and Snapchat" (p. 120).

Generational cohorts are often formed based on shared events during the formative years (MacKenzie & Scherer, 2019). Attempting to define millennials, Kadakia (2017) argues that millennials are a product of the world in which they grew up - a world replete with diversity on every corner, from ethical diversity to socioeconomic diversity. Additionally, millennials have been submerged in a digital world from birth, making them digital natives. The term digital native identifies millennials as the first generation of adults to have always had computers in their lives. Typically, millennials are incredibly comfortable with technology and multitask across devices and platforms with ease (Ray, 2013). While the digital age has impacted humanity across generations, it is incredibly impactful to the millennial generation because the connected world grew up alongside them (Kadakia, 2017).

The exposure to digital technologies from an early age has contributed to millennials' use of social media platforms and their engagement via the internet with others. Alongside entertainment purposes and connecting with others, it has been suggested that millennials may use social media and digital technology for emotional regulation (Bolton, et al., 2013). Baym (2015) writes:

> Many online groups provide bridging capital, exchanged in highly specialized relationships, yet it is also common to find members of online communities and social networks providing one another with the sort of emotional support often found in close relationships. (p. 92)

Millennials who are accustomed to digital interactions are finding emotional support systems on the same platforms they feel most comfortable. Further, the emotional support millennials

purport to find on an SNS aligns with Christakis and Fowler's (2009) theory of connectivity and emotional contagiousness between individuals in a social network.

In part, due to their position of being more digitally savvy than earlier generations, marketing strategists have identified crucial areas that must be considered to garner the attention and loyalty of the millennial consumer. One characteristic of millennials is their tendency to share everything. The social share bridges to another characteristic of millennials: they trust one another more than they trust companies trying to win their business (Padveen, 2017). Fromm and Viddler (2015) observe that millennials want to be a part of the creation process for goods and services that they can then share with others. They write, "Millennial parents don't want to just buy your brand; they want to be a part of it" (Fromm & Viddler, 2015, p. 48).

Crowdsourcing

The previous section identified millennials as being diverse in every aspect of life, with Kadakia (2017) asserting, "Millennials are also the most diverse generation in history, not just by ethnicity but by income, parent marital status, and individual marital status" (p. 26). Diversity is a part of the formula that makes crowdsourcing successful in large groups. Ito and Howe (2019, p. 197) describe crowdsourcing as having an "almost magical" quality. Crowdsourcing describes the behavior of a person who looks for information about a person or product from peer groups and across digital networks (Kadakia, 2017).

For the school concerned with how social networks impact millennials, crowdsourcing must be examined as one piece of the puzzle because millennials' consumer practices come in part from crowdsourcing. As previously noted in this chapter, millennials are comfortable with the social share and utilize it to obtain advice on purchasing products (Ray, 2013). Across SNSs, the social share means posting a link to information or products the user recommends or thinks

others would be interested in (Baym, 2015). Organizations like utilizing online social networks to reach audiences because of the low cost associated with it. Additionally, their audience has an opportunity to access the thoughts and opinions of others on a global platform (Sadovykh, Sundaram, & Piramuthu, 2015).

Researchers observe, "As partners, Millennials across the board can actually help brands determine the best way to reach consumers through the concept of crowdsourcing, using social media, and other venues and techniques as vehicles for engagement and brand participation" (Fromm & Viddler, 2015, p. 49). When a consumer can participate in product creation, they are more invested in a product's success. This crowdsourcing aspect is a positive experience for both the consumer and the business (Wood & Munoz, 2017). Major companies, such as LEGO and Samsung, have capitalized on garnering public attention and support by asking for public contributions to projects (Ito & Howe, 2019). At its best, crowdsourcing forges a symbiotic relationship between the consumer and business entity.

Apart from contributing to product creation, crowdsourcing also reflects product reviews available for purchasers to consult. To determine if product reviews matter, Mangold and Smith (2012) surveyed millennials in a behavioral lab to determine how much they relied on product reviews when making a purchase. They concluded that millennials engage with online reviews and make decisions based on those reviews (Mangold & Smith). This study also found little difference between whether millennial men or women were writing online reviews (Mangold & Smith).

Crowdsourcing in the digital age is vibrant, occurring at speeds never before experienced. This is due to the ability of online social networks to support and promote crowdsourcing behaviors. Christakis and Fowler (2009) observe, "The powerful effect of social networks on

individual behaviors and outcomes suggests that people do not have complete control over their own choice" (p. 32). A lack of control implies that certain decisions have a contagious quality which supports the theory of social networks presented by Christakis and Fowler (2009) that undergirds this study.

Summary of Theoretical Literature

Whether physical or virtual, social networks contribute to one's behaviors, likes, and dislikes (Christakis & Fowler, 2009). Millennials, having grown up immersed in digital technologies, often and early, are no exception to the social contagion that spreads through social media networking sites. Crowdsourcing, the phenomenon of collecting opinions on products from one's peers, is occurring across social network sites. For example, one group of surveyed millennials admitted using social media sites, such as Facebook, for posting reviews (Mangold & Smith, 2012).

Wood and Munoz (2017) suggest using connectedness and crowdsourcing to improve existing goods and services and mine for ideas for new ones. Harnessing social media to not only glean reviews of existing products, but to also uncover potential ideas, gives companies new avenues to explore. This underscores the need to have a robust social media practice and take advantage of crowdsourcing to garner customer loyalty. An important point of note is that social media should be considered a two-way communication tool and, as such, has the power to influence a large swath of consumers (Wood & Munoz).

However, there is an identified gap of how often and to what extent millennials may rely upon crowdsourcing across social media platforms when electing to enroll their child in a private school. School choice decisions should be examined more closely through the lens of crowdsourcing. This study endeavors to explore the relationship between social networks and

school choice decisions among parents of students enrolled in Shelby County, Tennessee, private schools.

Related Literature

At the heart of the proposed research lies how social connections between individuals influence a millennial parent's decision-making regarding school choice, particularly the connections between individuals on social media platforms. The importance of carefully guarding the school's narrative on social media cannot be taken for granted. Magette (2018) states, "A school system without an intentional and coordinated social media presence is seriously and even dangerously vulnerable to being falsely represented by someone else" (p. 7). First, one must strive to understand the very nature of the internet and how it has evolved into an attractive ecology steeped in social networks, where more and more individuals are spending time. The second related precept to define is what makes a private Christian school different from other private schools and public schools in America. Lastly, an exploration of related literature will identify any existing literature gaps.

Digital Evolutions

Web 1.0 to Web 3.0. Even within the digital world, there is a differentiation between the old and the new. For instance, "*New media* is a term used to describe a whole range of digital technologies and forms of media, including computers, the internet, cell phones, and smartphones, social networking software, and digital recording devices" (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 20). Digital technology has morphed into its own community filled with digital connections and is no longer simply machinated tools. Web 1.0, the earliest version of the internet, came to the forefront in the 1990s. Social connectivity was limited to primarily email and finding information on the worldwide web, and so it is known as the read-only Web

(Rudman & Bruwer, 2016; Yen, Zhang, C., Waluyo, & Park, 2015). Web page design required a specialized skill set and, as a result, information was published on the web by only those who could afford a web designer (Rudman & Bruwer). At the turn of the century, Web 1.0 graduated to Web 2.0. Web 2.0 allowed individuals to enjoy the vanguard of internet platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, and enabled people to engage in a more interactive format (Campbell & Garner).

Additionally, publishing information on the web became accessible to laypeople with the advent of blogging sites (Campbell & Garner, 2016). Regarding the difference between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0, McFarland and Ployhart (2015) explain, "…imagine a group of people talking over dinner. Web 1.0 platforms would be equivalent to members passing written notes back and forth, while Web 2.0 platforms would be more similar to members talking interactively" (p. 1654).

More recently, Web 3.0 has pushed its way forward, characterized by cloud services and smart devices in the palm of the hand (Campbell & Garner, 2016). Web 3.0 is also differentiated from its predecessors due to its capacity to connect data and information across various networks via a diverse collection of devices (Yen, Zhang, C., Waluyo, & Park, 2015). The ability of Web 3.0 to categorize and organize information in a manner similar to that of a human is also reflective of the unprecedented leap made in technology over the last few decades (Rudman & Bruwer, 2016). A more personalized Web experience is also made possible with Web 3.0 in the form of *Intelligent Agents*, special computerized programming which "will act as electronic assistants by automating repetitive tasks, intelligently harvesting and summarizing complex data and being able to learn on behalf of the user by analyzing the users' interaction with the Web" (Rudman & Bruwer, 2016, p. 138).

Social media. Social media outlets are digital because they solely exist on the internet using a platform, or portal, to connect people. Subcategories of social media outlets include networking sites that allow users to create and publish some type of user profile to be shared, either in part or in whole. Networking sites provide a virtual arena where users can connect and interact. Facebook is a common social networking site (SNS). Media sharing is another social media outlet, and examples include YouTube, Photobucket, and blogs (McFarland & Ployhard, 2015).

New media gives the user control to manipulate realities instead of old media, which simply allowed the user to view information or view the world. This empowers users with a sense of control as users experiment with content and explore the internet in a fluid, more unrestrained manner. Users can create new content by mixing and matching old content. This is called mashing up and remixing. Mashing up and remixing information offers an outlet for creativity and innovation (Campbell & Garner, 2016).

Social media allows relationships to form and grow in an ecology, unlike any experienced in previous generations. The vast number of connections one can be a part of in an online environment, as opposed to face-to-face relationships, is argued to offer effortless social capital (Ellison, Vitak, Gray, & Lampe, 2014). Researchers state, "Previous research has shown that publicly viewable forms of interaction on the site, such as commenting on a friend's status update, are significantly related to perceptions of social capital" (Ellison et al., 2014, p. 859). Additionally, maintaining relationships via social media platforms, such as Facebook, is less time-intensive than face-to-face relationship maintenance (Ellison, et al.). Further, given the ability to remain connected continuously despite time and space constraints, digital relationships are sustained somewhat differently from face-to-face relationships. (Campbell & Garner, 2016)

Social media is an ever-evolving ecology where groups and social organizations meet for information, fellowship, and advice (Magette, 2018). Rainie and Wellman (2012) posit social networks "provide conduits for information, guides to services, and ways to seek and ask for help" (p. 146). Social media encompasses a variety of platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Facebook. Facebook is identified as the source Americans most often visit upon waking and retiring to bed to find and consume news. The reach of Facebook cannot be underestimated as one-third of adults in the United States reportedly use the platform for current news reports (Matei, Russell, & Bertino, 2015). Facebook uses shifting algorithms to determine what appears in the user's news feed; however, the algorithm always ensures connectivity between users who often interact (Magette, 2018).

Twitter. Another social media platform, Twitter, is significantly influential. Twitter is a faster-paced social media platform than Facebook (Magette, 2018). In 2011, Twitter was shown to either beat or be on par with regular news outlets for breaking stories (Matei, Russell, & Bertino, 2015). Furthermore, data sets from Twitter can allow one to analyze crowds of users around a particular issue. Matei, Russell, and Bertino (2015) write, "In effect, we can create an aerial photo of the social media crowd as it forms while listening carefully to the banter taking place on the ground" (p. 68). This allows analysts the picture needed to manage the flow of information, even protecting, or promoting their own interests (Matei, Russell, & Bertino).

Hashtags (#), which originated with Twitter, have spread to Facebook and Instagram. Understanding the hashtag is relevant to the current research and how it may spread and identify information quickly and succinctly allow searches for school-related information. To further explain, "On Twitter, the pound, or hash, sign turns any word or group of words that directly

follows it into a searchable link allowing users to trace related content and conversations"
(Magette, 2018, p. 57). Hashtags, then, serve to connect a person with other people who share a
commonality in their pursuits and passions.

Instagram. Instagram relies on the visual art of photography and videography to draw
users (Magette, 2018). Humphrey (2016) calls it "essentially a photo-sharing site, infamous for
teenagers to use for sharing selfies and for foodies to share photographs of their dinners" (p.
211). Instagram is most easily navigated via an app rather than the web-based version, which is
accessible on a traditional computer. Like Twitter, those people the user follows will appear in
the feed (Humprey, 2016).

Digital Interactions for Schools

Social media inarguably offers new challenges for schools, and schools cannot afford to
ignore its presence and influence in the community, and by extension, the school (Magette,
2018). Bradley and McDonald (2011) believe that digital interactions are unsuccessful when
organizations emphasize the technologies over the desired purpose. For schools, then, the types
of digital technology utilized are less important than the school's reasons for using technology.
Technology merely enables the organization to drive a message (Bradley & McDonald).

It is typically understood that the person driving the message of a product, institution, or
other organization is called an influencer. Hennessy (2018) explains the role of influencers on
social media by writing:

> But in today's digital world, the word "influencer" is most commonly ascribed to
> someone who has clout through her digital channels, or as some like to call it "social
> currency". Whether she has a lot of followers or really high engagement, when she
> speaks, her audience listens, they act, and – most importantly to brands – they buy (p. 1).

The role of an influencer, then, could be in part to spread contagion. It is purported by Christakis and Fowler (2009) that "Online networks provide new avenues for influence and social contagion." In marketing a brand, influencers are often little more than paid celebrities who strategically endorse a brand or service (Hennessy, 2018).

A 2014 study conducted by Facebook and researchers at Cornell investigated social media's effect on a person's emotions. The study received a great deal of criticism as it did not go through appropriate ethical committee approvals; however, it has sparked a firestorm of interest surrounding the emotional contagion aspect of social media platforms, such as Facebook (Hallinan, Brubaker, & Fiesler, 2019). Similarly, Christakis and Fowler (2009) report that emotions can be transmitted when there are close ties between people. Social media platforms, like Facebook, may facilitate their spread and even enhance it. Those ties are not believed to contribute to social contagion, so much as acting as a channel to spread contagion when contacts are already closely connected (Christakis & Fowler).

Campbell and Garner (2016) view a blended online and offline presence as being inextricably intertwined together. They assert that strong ties do exist between the online life of an individual and the person's physical reality. The exegesis of this stand is: "Online routines become informed by offline ways of living, and a new cultural space emerges blending old and new values and expectations" (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 77).

Christian education

The aspect and role of Christian education is also addressed in the research conducted in this study, alongside an inquiry of what makes Christian education unique. This researcher specifically asked questions about enrollment in private Christian schools, and a foundational understanding of Christian education undergirds the question. Knight (2006) writes:

Christian education that is Christian in fact, rather than merely in word, must view the nature and potential of the student, the role of the teacher, the content of the curriculum, the methodological emphasis, and the social function of the school in the light of its philosophic undergirding (p. 203).

Similarly, Wilhoit (1991) opines four main elements of the educational process, including subject matter, students, teachers, and the learning environment.

Subject matter. Historically, character education has been an integral part of the classroom curriculum, even as schools have tried to identify and match the expectations of each era. As the nation has evolved, the attainment of character education through schools has attempted to keep pace with the changes occurring throughout society. In colonial America, moral education took place inside religious education, and this greatly influenced schools. During the nineteenth century, America experienced an influx of immigrants, and education in schools became the means to teach the morals and values of the country alongside subjects such as History. During the first half of the twentieth century, influenced by the World Wars, American character education emphasized citizenship and preparing workers for a more technological world. After 1950, American education began to see a return to values and morality lessons being infused into academic curricula. "We see in this early history of American education the power of the schools to teach students values not solely for the betterment of the individual, but more importantly, for the stability of the society" (Brimi, 2009, p. 127).

Although the curriculum may not be explicit in its teaching of morality, society expects education to encompass more than the traditional core subjects of Math, Science, Language Arts, and History. Good character is also likely to be a product of education (Pike, 2013). This is especially true of the Christian school movement in the United States. The Association of

Christian Schools International (ACSI) reports that parents deem a child's character and spiritual development more important than academic progress (Stone, 2017). Furthermore, strong moral character is correlated to academic success. Pike (2013) writes:

> When a parent, teacher, or school leader encourages a young person to achieve a personal best, to behave kindly and generously, to work well and not to give up when things are difficult, he or she is engaging in character education which enables academic progress to be achieved (p. 15).

Teachers. The nature of education makes it difficult for a teacher to hide his or her moral compass from students (Knight, 2006). Taking his cues from C. S. Lewis, Pike (2013) writes, "As teachers are to foster good character in their students, the character, as well as the intellect, of the teacher matters a great deal" (p. 124). Character, then, cannot be divorced from how teachers present themselves in a classroom.

One can deceive others, but that deception has an expiration date. Eventually, one's real character, or moral compass, will become evident. Bredfeldt (2006) writes, "But one cannot for long be an effective biblical leader-teacher without character" (p. 89). It is assumed that the character and moral compass of a teacher in a private, Christian school would be exemplary. The Christian teacher must also rely on biblical discernment when interacting with students in their care. The teacher's character must be such that God can use him to reach students, even when the student has underlying behavior issues. Knight (2006) relates, "The primary function of the teacher is to relate to Master Teacher in such a way that he or she becomes God's agent in the plan of redemption" (p. 213).

Learning environment. Pazmino (2008) suggests there are three interrelated areas to the learning environment. First, he writes of the *natural aspect*. The natural aspect is simply the

physical surroundings of the classroom, including furniture, educational manipulatives, posters, and comfort, such as the temperature of the room. The next facet to consider is the *human aspect*. Teachers and students and any other human resource, such as an Educational Assistant, fall into the category of *the human aspect*. Lastly, there is the *divine aspect*, or the presence of the Holy Spirit, considered by Pazmino (2008) to be the "determinative environmental presence" (p. 116). All forms of the learning environment, both the human and non-human aspects, provide varying avenues for the student to engage in meaningful learning (Dettoni & Wilhoit, 1995). Of the three aspects of the learning environment, no single one can be disregarded in the Christian classroom (Pazmino).

School Choice

A critical strand involved in the current research is school choice when presented with public, private, and charter options. Hoerr (2005) argues that choice has far-reaching benefits, including garnering a higher level of loyalty to the school from both the parents and the students. Further affecting private school enrollment is the plethora of charter and public-school options increasingly available with no tuition commitments (Stone, 2017).

Jabbar and Lenhoff (2019) state, "Parents ultimately choose schools based on the same factors they weigh in the decision-making process, including school academic proficiency or test scores, racial demographics, safety, location, values, and discipline" (p. 354). Other considerations in school choice decision-making include preferences delineated by social class and socioeconomic status. Rather than academic purposes, parents in New Orleans, Louisiana, chose schools for more pragmatic reasons such as nearby family support and keeping siblings in the same school after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (Jabbar & Lenhoff, 2019). One danger some

areas with school choice options faces is the likelihood of contributing to racial and economic segregation.

Jabbar and Lenhoff (2019) do not weigh private evangelical schools in their discussion of school choice and school choice decision-making. However, there is precedence for discussing the effects of a parent's religious beliefs on the school choice decision-making process. Yang and Kayaardi (2010) examined characteristics of parents who enroll children in non-public schools and subsequently concluded that a parent's religious beliefs affect school choice selection when private Christian schools are available. They concluded:

> This result suggests that the importance of religious education and discipline in religious schools may overshadow their cost, which is relatively low compared to private schools. Parents with more children may prefer to send them to the same school to maintain consistency in education, to keep their children company and to save time and expense on transportation (Yang & Kayaardi, 2010, p. 241).

Due to the age of the study, this research does not consider millennials as the parental generation, nor does it consider digital footprints or social media interactions. It does, however, indicate how a parent's religious status has historically impacted school choice decisions (Yang & Kayaardi, 2010).

Literature Gaps

Given that this research focused on millennial parents making school choice decisions related to private Christian schools, literature gaps surfaced. First, there is a gap related to the specificity and unique hallmarks of the millennial generation, as evidenced in Prichard and Swezey's (2016) study. Mangold and Smith (2012) studied generational issues but did not consider the element of private Christian education in Millennial decision-making. Furthermore,

Goldring and Phillips (2008) did not consider social media platforms affecting school choice decisions among millennial parents. Finally, Fromm and Viddler (2015) showed that millennials rely on crowdsourcing to choose products and services. However, they did not examine this phenomenon specific to the selection of private, Christian schools. Each literature gap can be further explored.

Selection of Christian schools. Prichard and Swezey's (2016) research revealed that parents do not use a systematic decision-making method in selecting a Christian school over a public school for their children. Their research was a grounded theory study, and participants were identified as Christian parents of school-aged children, which limited the research to participants who self-identified as Christians (Prichard & Swezey). Relevant to the proposed study, they write, "When decision-makers feel overly emotional in any issue, they may react and process information in a different way than when that issue is not emotionally important to them" (Prichard & Swezey, 2016, p. 20). Prichard and Swezey (2016) did not specifically parents' decision-making trends among the generation of millennials.

Millennials and peer reviews. Mangold and Smith (2012) support the notion millennials refer to social media for decision-making when selecting a service or product, often relying heavily on peer reviews. Their study found that millennials are impacted by online reviews (Mangold & Smith, 2012). Results also determined that Facebook along with company websites were most chosen as the specific sites from which millennials read and shared reviews (Mangold & Smith). Exploring this phenomenon's effect solely on private Christian school enrollment bears merit for further research, particularly in a community where school choices abound.

Networks for choice. Goldring and Phillips (2008) examined parental choice in selecting a private school in the Nashville, Tennessee, metropolitan public school district. Informal

networks, such as a church, family, friends, neighbors, and the school's reputation, were found to be one element relied upon by parents for school choice. However, Goldring and Phillips (2008) did not isolate digital networks, such as social media platforms, as a specified area of study. Another finding from their study was a correlation between parent choice of private schools and parenting style. They found that parents who communicated with their children about school regularly and were involved in their child's school were more likely to consider enrolling their child in a private school. This study did not examine social media and parental generational factors, nor did it examine the concept of crowdsourcing in school choice decisions (Goldring & Phillips, 2008).

Millennials and crowdsourcing. Social media is a catalyst for decision-making in millennials (Bolton, et al., 2013). As millennials enter adulthood and begin to parent, they are likely referring to social media for recommendations and reviews on potential schools to enroll their children (Stone, 2017). Expressly, millennial mothers have been interested in crowdsourcing due to their "collaborative nature" (Fromm & Viddler, 2015, p. 49). Further research has noted that millennials are willing to pay a premium price for commodities such as groceries if they feel a certain level of engagement with the brand. One way to obtain this engagement is for companies to utilize social media and create branding that appeals to the millennial generation, garnering attention and even interaction on social media (Fromm & Viddler, 2015). Literature has not addressed how the marketing of a private school through social media engagement and presence may affect school choice decisions facing millennial parents.

Social networks and decision-making. One group of researchers explored how online social networks affected individuals engaged in decision-making (Sadovykh, Sundaram, & Piramuthu, 2015). Participants in their study indicated that social network sites were mostly used

to observe discussions around a particular product or service, offering solutions to problems. Their research showed that in the early stages of decision-making, social networks were more influential. Once decisions were made, social networks were less likely to be utilized to monitor outcomes (Sadovykh, Sundaram, & Piramuthu, 2015). This research applied statistical analyses to the problem. It did not consider parameters such as the age of the decision-maker, the type of decision seeking to be made, or specific types of online social networks, which leaves a gap for the current study.

Current research. The study sought to develop thick descriptions of the lived experiences of social contagion, which spread across online social networks among millennial parents. It investigated the role of crowdsourcing in school selection and reported the parents' perceptions social contagion of influence driving school choice in Shelby County, Tennessee.

Summary of Literature Review

After an extensive review of the literature, the decision-making experiences of parents has not been linked to social contagions across social media networks. The impact of social connections and the spread of social contagion has not been examined related to school choice among millennial parents. Given the digital savviness of the millennial generation, this research examined how parents experience the influence of school choice conversations across social network sites. Influence on school choice was the specific social contagion being studied.

This chapter provided an overview of topics relevant to this study. The questions related to social contagion, crowdsourcing, and influence were addressed from the biblical standpoint of influence, gossip, self-control, and judgmental attitudes of individuals who create posts on social media that either positively or negatively affect the organization's reputation across the community. Conclusively, the biblical mandate to "love your neighbor as yourself" (*English*

Standard Version Bible, 2016, Matthew 22:39) must reign in a person's online presence as much as it does in their offline reality.

As presented by Christakis and Fowler's (2009) research, the theory of connectivity has been outlined and provided the primary theoretical scaffolding for the proposed research. This researcher asked millennials how online experiences influenced their decision-making and, subsequently, mapped social network ties. Social contagion may be transmitted via social media networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and therefore, social contagion will also be mapped on the social network connections map.

Lastly, this chapter delved into related threads of literature, including building an understanding of the evolution of the internet and how social media emerged through the internet's metamorphosis from Web 1.0 to Web 3.0. A closer look at generational issues affecting and confronting the millennials, for whom the current research is targeted, has also been examined in this chapter. Finally, an overview of what Christian education means and how it stands out among its public counterparts was discussed.

Each strand of literature examined provides the framework upon which this study was built. Literature gaps were identified in generational research as it pertains to millennial parenting practices, research related to social media for the Christian school, and research on how crowdsourcing may affect the millennial parent's decision to choose a private Christian school (Fromm & Viddler, 2015; Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Mangold & Smith, 2012).

Profile of the Current Study

Leaders of private Christian schools are constantly seeking ways to prevent enrollment declines and remain viable. Christian school leaders are dedicated to offering a school choice option where academic subjects are taught from a biblical worldview, subsequently launching

young people into college who can successfully defend their faith. With school choice being a frequent news item, leaders of faith-based schools need to understand the influence that social network sites, specifically the postings of friends and friends of friends, may have on the decision to enroll in a private, Christian school. Specifically, the development of thick descriptions of the social contagion of influence which parents may experience on a SNS regarding a particular school were developed from this study.

For this study, an ethnography utilized unstructured interviews, focus groups, and observations in the form of field notes. A closer look at ethnography as a methodology for social science research is found in Chapter Three.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this qualitative research project was ethnography. This chapter seeks to orient the reader to the design of the research. It also conveys the rationale behind selecting ethnography as an appropriate methodology to approach the possible social contagion of influence across Facebook on school choice decision-making among millennial parents. The researcher was interested in developing thick descriptions (Neuman, 2006) of the lived experiences of social contagion, decision-making processes, and crowdsourcing to select a private K-12 Christian school in Shelby County, Tennessee.

This chapter delves into the sampling method and procedures employed to gather interviewees' names for the study. Focus groups and unstructured interviews were conducted for data collection. During data analysis, three levels of coding were engaged to identify themes of information. Finally, this chapter discusses study rigor and trustworthiness.

Research Design Synopsis

The Problem

Enrollment in private Christian schools is declining (DeLaRosa, J., 2021; Stone, 2017). As leaders of private Christian schools battle declining enrollment, a study of the phenomenon driving millennial parents to select private Christian education for their children can assist in writing school improvement plans. This study sought to explore the impact of social contagion on school choice decisions made by millennial parents of children enrolled in a K-12 private Christian school. No longer are private schools only competing with public schools, but they also compete with charter schools. EducationData.org reports public school enrollment increasing in 32 states nationwide (Hanson, 2021). This is both a national shift and a local shift. The *Memphis*

Business Journal reported a decline of 1,502 students enrolled at Top 25 List private schools in the Memphis area between the 2015-16 school year and the 2019-20 school year (Bolton, 2020).

Harsh (2018) argues that parents share a common rationale for enrolling in private K-12 Christian schools. Religiosity is one of the common strands which parents fall back on when selecting a Christian school for their K-12 student (Harsh). Based on religiosity, and the view that religiosity is declining among adults, Harsh (2018) concluded that private school enrollment would naturally fall. Declining enrollment is well-documented (Hanson, 2021; Stone, 2017). However, an understanding of the role, if any, that the social contagion of influence across social ties, as proposed by Christakis and Fowler (2009), has in school choice decision making was not previously explored.

Prichard and Swezey (2016) also explored reasons why parents make certain school choice decisions and, similar to Harsh (2018), found commonalities among parents who make certain choices. Taking a grounded theory approach, the researchers learned that parents were more focused on the current school climate and did not consider the long-term benefits of selecting a private Christian school (Prichard & Swezey).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the literature by identifying to what extent millennials perceive social contagion across Facebook as it relates to influencing the decision to select private Christian education for their child at a specified institution.

The theory guiding this study is the theory of connectivity through social networks as proposed by Christakis and Fowler (2009), as it affects the behavior of millennials engaged on Facebook to glean information and opinions about various private Christian schools in Shelby County, Tennessee. Drawing on Christakis and Fowler's (2009) research on social contagion,

this study sought to describe how millennial parents may or may not imitate their friends in selecting a particular private K-12 Christian school for their child.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide this study:

RQ1: What online experiences on Facebook influence parental decision-making for private Christian education in Shelby County, Tennessee?

RQ2: How do parents describe their online encounters when those encounters relate to school choice and decision-making?

RQ3: How do parents understand their online SNS experiences as they relate to school choice decision-making?

Research Design and Methodology

This research study is an ethnography of millennial parents who have children enrolled in a private school in Shelby County, Tennessee, for the 2021-22 school year. Ethnography is derived from anthropology and sociology (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Neuman, 2006). Traditionally, ethnographers spend time in the field, submerged in the culture they are studying, which allows for first-hand observations of the socialization that occurs across the culture (Neuman, 2006).

Setting

In Shelby County, Tennessee, and the surrounding metropolitan area, there are a plethora of schools that families may choose. The public school system consists of one large county district and five municipal school districts. The municipal districts serve families in a higher socio-economic bracket and have more resources at their disposal. For example, the Town of Collierville, one Shelby County suburb, comprises nearly fifty thousand people with a median

household annual income of over $113,000 (Collierville, TN, 2021). In contrast, the city of Memphis has 650,000 people and a median household yearly income of approximately $37,000 (Deoitte, n.d.).

Other municipal school districts include Arlington Community Schools, Bartlett City Schools, Collierville Schools, Germantown Municipal School District, Lakeland School System, and Millington Municipal Schools (School Districts, 2021). Also, in Shelby County, there is a specialized district, Achievement School District. Achievement School District is a statewide school system designed to assist the poorest performing schools. Some schools in this district exist as charter schools (School Districts, 2021).

Additionally, there are 117 private schools in Shelby County (Top Shelby County private schools, 2021). Representing private schools are The Memphis Association of Independent Schools (MAIS) and the Catholic Diocese of Memphis. MAIS boasts over thirty member schools from the greater Memphis area. MAIS schools are run independently and are not constrained by national or state educational curriculum, allowing them to design and implement programs tailored to their communities (Throckmorton, 2021).

Bolton (2020) reported only 16% of enrolled private school students live in the surrounding municipal school districts, while a combined 56% live in Memphis and Cordova. The Shelby County School System serves the communities of both Memphis and Cordova.

For this study, there are many school-choice options, in the form of public schools, including municipal public schools and charter schools with state oversight, private, independent schools, and Catholic schools, which made it an ideal location to study the impact of social contagion on school choice decision-making.

Participants

Guest (2014) posits that socio-demographics are an excellent place to begin identifying participants for an ethnography. Given that this study focused on millennial parents, the study drew from participants who self-reported being millennial and have at least one school-aged child enrolled in a private Christian school. Participants were furthered narrowed to those whose children are enrolled in a private school in Shelby County, Tennessee, for the 2021-22 school year.

Marital status, gender, household income, and religious affiliation was not obtained for this research. Further, participants self-reported holding a Facebook account on which they spend time scrolling and posting at least weekly.

Sampling

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative research benefits when researchers purposefully select participants, called purposeful sampling, to find participants that will helped provide insight into the phenomenon being studied. Therefore, this researcher used criterion sampling, one type of purposeful sampling, to identify participants who "[met] an important, predetermined criterion" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 170). In this study, the predetermined criteria were being a millennial, as defined by Stone (2017), and having a child enrolled in a private Christian school in Shelby County, Tennessee, for the 2021-22 school year.

Obtaining the initial group of participants was done through a survey link launched on Facebook, asking for participants. The survey included contact information to schedule the interview and asked for participants to confirm their availability to participate in interviews and focus groups. The following questions were also included in the initial survey:

1. Is your child enrolled in a private school in Shelby County, Tennessee, for the 2021-22 school year?

2. How many times per week do you access Facebook and/or Instagram?

For the first question, the researcher sought respondents who answered yes. In the second question, the researcher was looking for respondents who self-reported accessing Facebook and/or Instagram at least 3 times per week. The initial survey also asked for the participant's year of birth to allow the researcher to ascertain the participant met the criteria of being a millennial based on the Barna Group (Stone, 2017) definition.

In the second stage of sampling, the researcher employed respondent-driven sampling (RDS), a form of referral sampling. Participants identified in the initial criterion sampling process were given unique computer-generated QR codes to be shared with three friends to take the initial survey for the study. These QR codes acted as referral coupons and also "…[allowed the] researcher to map out the social connections among study participants" (Bernard & Gravlee, 2014, p. 221). This was used to create a social network map modeled after Christakis and Fowler's (2009) research. The mapped connections were then verified during interviews and focus groups.

Role of the Researcher

In the case of ethnographical research, researchers often become deeply embedded in the culture they are studying. Coffey (2018) posits, "The more important tool in and of ethnography is the researcher" (p. 59). The researcher must be present in a way that is greater than a physical presence, but rather, is a part of the culture being observed. Simultaneously, the researcher must guard against going native. A researcher who is said to 'go native' is fully submerged in the culture and can no longer hold any measure of an unbiased observer (Neuman, 2006).

The researcher who is conducting an ethnographic study must guard against bringing personal experiences and ideas to the setting that may unduly influence observations or even the actions of the members of the culture being studied (Coffey, 2018). Another consideration for the researcher is maintaining reliable and cooperative relationships with the participants while simultaneously documenting observations and conversations in a comprehensive and unbiased manner (Shagir, 2017). Thus, ethnographical research relies heavily on the researcher's ability to interact in a natural, peaceable way to glean as much understanding of the culture and behavior as possible.

Ethical Considerations

After approval by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (Appendix F), study participants were provided with an informed consent document outlining the research project, including the design and any risks associated with participation. The assumed risk was minimal because the study aimed to gather descriptions of the lived experience of a phenomenon considered normal in today's society, the engagement of social media to gather opinions. Additionally, participants were provided with a letter outlining how data would be collected, secured, and reported. A copy of the informed consent document and letter regarding data management are included in the appendix of the research study (Appendix B and C).

Because this study did not focus on students or minor children, but rather the lived experiences of parents, no data about the age, gender, grade, or other identifying information about students was collected. Parents were not asked any questions about their children beyond the criteria that at least one child was enrolled at a private Christian school in Shelby County, Tennessee.

Pseudonyms were assigned to all study participants to maintain confidentiality. Web-based software, *Transcribe by Wreally,* converted audio interviews and focus groups to text (Convert audio & video to text, securely, 2021). *Transcribe* allowed any audio or video file to play directly from the researcher's computer and stored the transcribed text in the browser. This means the information was never uploaded to a cloud or other site. The text was only accessed from the computer from which the audio or video file originated (Convert audio & video to text, securely, 2021). The *Transcribe by Wreally* privacy policy is included in Appendix H.

Hard copies of any transcribed interview data or focus group transcriptions have been stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home office and will be kept for three years. At the end of three years, it will be shredded. The researcher's home office is secured and monitored 24 hours a day by Security Solutions, Inc. All computer-generated data has been transferred to an external thumb drive which is encrypted to prevent any data breach. An external thumb drive mitigates any breaches possible on a cloud drive. The external thumb drive is also stored at the researcher's home office in a locked file cabinet.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Data collection methods must suit research methodology (Hays & Singh, 2012). This research was designed as an ethnography. Therefore observations, informal, non-structured interviews, and focus groups were the primary means of data collection.

Collection Methods

Observations occurred during interactions with study participants in one-on-one, unstructured interview settings. Interviews were conducted at a local coffee shop or via Zoom to facilitate the conversational tone desired in an unstructured interview. Audio recordings of the

interviews were made and transcribed for inclusion in the final study. The list of interview topics is found in Appendix D.

Focus groups were conducted via Zoom and recorded. Recordings have been downloaded to a thumb drive and encrypted to maintain confidentiality and security. Focus groups consisted of groups of 3 individuals at a time. All participants were invited to at least one focus group, and two focus groups were conducted. Some participants declined participation in the focus groups, but did complete the interviews.

Instruments and Protocols

Ethnographies often rely on fieldwork, with the researcher becoming deeply embedded in the culture being studied (Neuman, 2006). Many different data collection techniques can be employed in ethnographic research, including field notes, interviews, focus groups, and participant observations (O'Reilley, 2009). In this study, the researcher kept formal and informal field notes, utilized unstructured interviews, and followed up with focus groups.

Field notes

Handwritten field notes, or scratch notes, were notes kept while in the field and provided snippets of information for the researcher to elaborate on later. Some researchers choose to keep field notes in a small journal, on their cell phones, as an audio recording to themselves, or in some other unobtrusive yet convenient way (O'Reilley, 2009). Field notes for this project were kept in a small, dated journal which were with the researcher throughout the project. The journal is stored in the researcher's secured home office.

Scratch notes were then be typed into a document in Microsoft Word and labeled and encrypted for security purposes.

Unstructured interviews

While some ethnographers may choose to use structured or semi-structured interviews, this project utilized unstructured interviews to maintain a friendlier, more casual form of data collection (O'Reilley, 2009). A series of topics (Appendix D) guided this researcher during interviews to gather information about a millennial's decision-making process to choose a private Christian school and if there was any perception of social contagion across Facebook when it came to the selection of a millennial school. Interview topics are included in Appendix D.

Focus Groups

The third form of data collection was focus groups. Two focus groups consisting of three individuals and four individuals were conducted. Topics of social contagion, school choice, crowdsourcing, and other decision-making factors in school selection guided the conversation within the focus group. O'Reilley (2009) offers a rationale for utilizing focus groups in ethnographies and writes:

> Unlike traditional focus groups, planned discussions undertaken by an ethnographer are likely to use already existing groups of people who know each other and have some relation to the topic you are pursuing. They may take place more than once, building up relationships over time, in settings with which the participants are familiar. They work particularly well in the early stages of a project, since they generate a range of topics, approaches, and responses. Finally, planned discussions may provide an opportunity to talk with people you would not be able to talk to alone, and about topics that would be inappropriate one to one (p. 79).

Focus groups allowed this researcher to verify the social network map and previously obtained data, as well as to gain clarity on concepts gleaned during the interviews.

Procedures

For this research to be conducted ethically, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Liberty University received copies of all documentation and proposed instruments planned in the study. Creswell and Creswell (2018) emphasize the importance of this and explain, "IRB committees exist on campuses because of federal regulations that provide protection against human rights violations" (p. 92). The proposed consent form (Appendix C), a copy of the questionnaire used in criterion sampling (Appendix A), the research topic list (Appendix D) and a copy of the participant letter (Appendix B) were submitted for approval before beginning the research. Other documents, as required, were also provided to the IRB.

Once respondents affirmed their willingness to participate in the research, the informed consent document was emailed (Appendix C). During this phase, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions or bring to the researcher's attention any concerns about participation. The informed consent document was signed and returned before the interview process began, with most participants printing the document and bringing it to the interview with them. Consent forms were also available at the interview if the participants had not brought one with them. Once the researcher received consent documents, interviews were conducted. Participants who mailed the consent document to the researcher's home were scheduled for an interview via Zoom video conferencing or met with the researcher in a coffee shop.

Focus groups utilized the web-based video conferencing software, Zoom. This was to encourage as much participation as possible and allow participants to join the conversation from a location of their choosing. Additionally, Zoom better enabled the researcher to record the sessions to be later uploaded for transcription. To assist in coding during the results phase of the project, web-based Atlas.ti was employed (QDA software - atlas.ti, 2021). All data was secured

on the researcher's laptop, which is password protected. Participants were assigned pseudonyms for reporting data to preserve the confidentiality of each individual.

<div align="center">**Data Analysis**</div>

Data analysis for qualitative research is not reliant on statistics and numerical data. Thus, care must be exercised in its analysis. Neuman (2006) explains, "The data are relatively imprecise, diffuse, and context-based, and can have more than one meaning. This is not seen as a disadvantage" (p. 459). It is also important to note that in a qualitative research design, the data is dense and rich in word pictures from which the researcher must draw themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Analysis and coding are discussed in further detail in this section.

Analysis Methods

The researcher was responsible for all data analysis. Once transcribed, the researcher organized interviews on an encrypted thumb drive and stored them in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home office. Transcriptions allowed the researcher to ensure accuracy when reporting participants' connections and experiences of social contagion.

Coding. Saldaña (2016) writes, "A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 3). Since the proposed research was centered on gathering language-rich data through descriptions of lived experiences, coding was an appropriate way of organizing data into themes.

Researchers who utilize coding in data analysis are looking for patterns, specifically for information that appears twice or more (Saldaña, 2016). Coding is difficult to perfect the first time the researcher reviews the data, and it is essential to engage multiple stages of coding for

accuracy. For this project, three stages of coding were conducted. Open coding, axial coding, and selective coding were performed in that order.

To assist with coding interviews and organizing coded data, this researcher usedAtlas.ti, an online qualitative data analysis software program (QDA software - atlas.ti, 2021). Coding software is an efficient tool for organizing qualitative research, and it allowed the researcher to review the data through specific searches. Additionally, coding software allowed the researcher to work through data more quickly, making it easier to review (Williams & Moser, 2019). Although software was used for the overall larger task of coding and organizing data, the researcher hand-coded to verify and even edit assigned codes from the software (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Open coding, sometimes called initial coding (Saldaña, 2016), allowed the researcher to work through the interview without a preconceived notion of which themes or topics were anticipated or hoped for in the data (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). This method allowed the researcher to find the themes or descriptive labels within the data and examine them for commonalities and differences (Saldaña, 2016). Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest that codes can typically be categorized as expected codes, surprising codes, and codes of unusual interest. Caution was exercised against prematurely attaching a code to a piece of data unless the data was understood, since prematurely labeling data can cause there to be problems in identifying any underlying themes or correlations later on (Williams & Moser, 2019).

Once open coding was complete, the researcher reviewed the coded notes and themes and began axial coding to organize critical concepts (Saldaña, 2016). The researcher identified themes or categories which emerged as integral to the experiences of social contagion (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). Axial coding provided a path for the researcher to identify a core category which

is the axis upon which other categories revolve in some way (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). As needed, axial coding was repeated for multiple themes that the researcher believed to be a core category. Axial coding was used to narrow the data into a single, overarching theme in the research.

Lastly, the researcher again sifted through the data and scanned for significant themes to guide the final analysis. This was the stage of selective coding or theoretical coding. Through selective coding, a single theory emerged as the core upon which the phenomenon rested and offered a narrative depiction of the phenomenon based on the reported experiences of participants (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). Definitions of the codes are assimilated into Appendix I.

Not unlike the ones utilized by Christakis and Fowler (2009), a social contagion map was developed to show the connections between interviewees and other individuals participating in the study. This map was a continuation of the map created during sampling. The researcher used the initial sampling map to draw connections between coded themes and participants as the study unfolded.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is an all-encompassing term referring to the validity of a qualitative study. It is vital to show trustworthiness for the study to be considered solid and worthwhile. Hays & Singh (2012) argue that the truth found through qualitative research is its validity.

Trustworthiness can be attributed to a study when there is evidence of prolonged engagement or when the researcher spends an extensive amount of time with interviewees to build a relationship required for an ethnographical research endeavor (Hays & Singh, 2012). Spending time one-on-one with participants, engaging in informal conversations, and listening

during focus groups gave this researcher many opportunities to build the relationships necessary for a level of trust to be born.

Trustworthiness can also be obtained through member checking (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hays & Singh, 2012). In the proposed research design, member checking occurred during focus groups when clarifying questions strategically probed participants into affirming or denying what the researcher understood in earlier conversations. This is a level of verification often employed through one-on-one second, informal conversations.

To further uphold the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher sought to build in a measure of credibility through "thick description[s] of the phenomenon under scrutiny" (Shento, 2004, p. 72). Well-developed, robust field notes provided support and credibility to transcribed unstructured interviews and focus group transcripts.

A study's dependability is also a critical component to the trustworthiness of an investigation. This research study includes detailed descriptions of procedures and events to allow potential future researchers to repeat the study (Shento, 2004), thereby rendering the study dependable. Closely related to dependability is confirmability. Shento (2004) asserts, "Here steps must be taken to help ensure as far as possible that the work's findings are the result of experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher" (p. 72). To ensure confirmability of the proposed study, all interview transcripts, and transcripts of the focus groups, along with completed field notes, interview transcripts were consulted throughout the study. Direct quotes from participants are included in Chapters Four and Five.

Chapter Summary

This research study sought to understand how social contagion may travel across social networks related to school choice in Shelby County, Tennessee. Social contagion has been identified as a phenomenon that reflects all sorts of human behavior, from emotional states to physical states. Christakis and Fowler (2009) write, "We are biologically hardwired to mimic others outwardly, and in mimicking their outward displays, we come to adopt their inward states" (p. 37). The central question this researcher sought to answer was how experiences across social network sites, such as Facebook, facilitate social contagion related to school choice. Do parents attempt to enroll a child in a private Christian school because their peer group also chooses private Christian schools for their children?

To unpack this research, the researcher offers thick descriptions based on field notes, unstructured interviews, and focus groups. In addition to thick descriptions, the researcher employed three levels of coding so that emerging themes and concepts could be identified and verified during data analysis. A social network map was utilized to show connections between study participants and then updated to reflect any connections participants may have related to school choice.

The proposed study is intended to provide insights into how millennial parents make school choice decisions for their children in attending a K-12 private Christian school in Shelby County, Tennessee. The study aimed to specifically examine the role social contagion, as defined by Christakis and Fowler (2009), potentially has in a millennial's parent decision-making.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the literature by identifying to what extent millennials perceive influence across Facebook to select private Christian education. The theory guiding this study is the theory of connectivity through social networks, as proposed by Christakis and Fowler (2009). An examination of Facebook as a possible conduit for social contagion as related to influencing decisions was studied. The researcher intended to ascertain information and opinions from parents who are active on Facebook and choose private, Christian schools in Shelby County, Tennessee, for their children. Drawing from Christakis and Fowler's (2009) research on social contagion, this study describes how millennial parents may or may not imitate their friends in the selection of a particular private school.

This chapter begins with an outline of the specific protocol and measures employed during the data analysis, provides a demographic and brief generalized description of the study participants, notes the themes and sub-themes identified during interviews and focus groups, offers excerpts of selected participant interviews, and provides responses to the research questions.

Compilation Protocol and Measures

This study is intended to provide rich descriptions of how millennials who utilize social media make school choice decisions, specifically as it pertains to enrolling their child in a private Christian school in the Memphis, Tennessee, area. A gap in the literature was identified and outlined in chapter two. The protocols below address the procedures and processes this researcher undertook to obtain data to adequately answer the research questions related to school choice decisions made by millennial parents. A short questionnaire was posted on three separate

dates to begin the participant recruitment process. The questionnaire was designed to ensure that potential participants met the criteria of being a millennial, having a child enrolled in a Shelby County, Tennessee, private school, and spending time on social media. Individuals who met the criteria received an email from the researcher outlining the study's focus and the commitment needed to participate. A copy of the email is in Appendix B. Participants also received a QR code for them to share with their friends who could also qualify for participation in the research study. The QR code was used to obtain additional respondents as part of respondent-driving sampling, the second sampling method utilized. The QR code directed them to the brief initial survey, and participants who qualified received the same letter (Appendix B) via email about the study.

Participants scheduled a one-on-one interview with the researcher. Unstructured interviews commenced and lasted from 30 minutes to one hour and 30 minutes, depending on the participant's level of enthusiasm and depth of answers to the questions. Each interview was fully transcribed and field notes were also complied by the researcher. In total 13 hours of interactive dialogue was obtained. After initial interviews were complete, two focus groups were held via Zoom resulting in approximately three hours of fully transcribed discussion related to the topic list found in Appendix D.

All transcribed interviews, both one-on-one interviews and focus groups, were uploaded to *Transcribe by Wreally* qualitative web-based software and coded for thematic analysis. Responses to the research questions guiding the study were derived from the data.

Demographics and Sample Data

Nine individuals participated in the unstructured one-one-one interviews. All participants self-identified as being born between 1984 and 2002 (Stone, 2017), thus being a millennial as

defined by this study, and having at least one child enrolled in a Shelby County Tennessee, private school. They also self-reported engaging on social media, specifically Facebook or Instagram on a regular basis. Some participants reported scrolling, viewing, commenting, or posting on social media thirty or more times per week and some simply answered they were on social media "…way too much."

Individuals were then assigned a pseudonym, drawn from a top 20 name list for millennials (Redmond, 2018). Pseudonyms were identified from this list to provide anonymity for participants, while maintaining the flavor of the generation being studied. Participants were all identified through the survey as part of the initial criterion sampling method or the secondary respondent-driven sampling method. Once individuals were confirmed, through the survey, to qualify for the research study, participants received the confidentiality statement and were given the opportunity to schedule one-on-one interviews with the researcher at a time most convenient to the interviewee. A demographic chart (Table 1) of the participants, including descriptive data is provided. Data was derived from the initial qualifying survey.

Table 1

Pseudonym	Year of Birth	Frequency of Social Media Usage	Brief Description
John	1989	Daily	Father of one child
Ashley	1984	Multiple times per day	Mother of two children
Sarah	1987	Daily	Mother of three children
Justin	1987	Daily	Father of three children
Amanda	1986	5 times per week	Mother of four children
Danielle	1989	Several times per day	Mother of two children
Taylor	1984	Too many (times per week)	Mother of three children

Jennifer	1984	15 times per week	Mother of three children
Kayla	1987	More than 5 times per week	Mother of one child

Participant 1: John

John is a well-spoken businessman who has one daughter in the fifth grade at a local private Christian school. John was engaged throughout the interview and spoke passionately, yet thoughtfully, about questions relating to social media engagement and the school climate in the Memphis, Tennessee, area. John initially did not feel like social media had influenced his decision to enroll his daughter in a private school, but later in the interview he spoke from the point of view as a businessman with employees. He shared that he saw social media as a "great marketing tool" and compared it metaphorically to a window through which others can peer into one's world. John said that most people who walk into his business have already looked his company up on social media and have read about others' experiences with his business.

John maintained that he felt he could look past the posts of his friends to make school choice decisions, despite his conviction that many people do use friends' posts to make crowdsourcing decisions when they are in the market for everything from a private school to a brand of soap. He said:

> When you post things can get tied to you that may not even be true. Just because posting something on social media can lead to something that somebody else may have said and now you have common beliefs with somebody that's doing something crazy. Then, the next thing you know, then you walk in, you know, you've got people walking in, with the stereotype of this is how you are or this is how your child's school is.

Another area of concern for John was the frequency with which parents in his child's private school are becoming Facebook friends with the school's teachers. He states, "This begins innocently enough because parents want to know more about their child's teacher, but it has enormous potential to be disastrous." John further explained that when a teacher gets frustrated and posts negatively about her school on social media, she often forgets that her audience is now her parents. John says this can cause frustration on the parents' side and lead them to question their school choice decisions.

Participant 2: Ashley

Ashley is a stay-at-home mother of two elementary aged children enrolled in a private school near her home. She offered that the public-school option she is geographically zoned for would not have been a good fit for her family because of her faith. In Ashley's mind, the most important reason to enroll her children in a private school was so they could receive an education anchored by a biblical worldview.

Regarding social media, Ashley stressed that she was convinced her generation was absolutely addicted to social media. Ashley said, "My generation is competitive even when we think we are not. We always want to be seen in a positive light by other people." She believes that keeping track of her peer group on Facebook is one way to know if you are measuring up to your peers. When Ashley sees one friend post about a school on Facebook, she is immediately drawn to look at the school's official page to learn what she can. Ashley was heart-wrenchingly honest in her assessment that is very easy to get caught up in a modern-day popularity contest on Facebook. Ashley acknowledged that social media is not a neutral environment, and she said, "I have no idea how to change online experiences to make them less of a popularity contest and more of a positive interaction."

Participant 3: Sarah

Sarah came to the interview with a passion for the topic of social media and the millennial reliance on crowdsourcing for all sorts of information across social media platforms. She offered the assessment that she spends entirely too much time scrolling on social media but says she simply cannot help herself. As social media relates to schools, Sarah said that she finds it most disconcerting when her peers "teacher bash" on Facebook. Those are the posts she finds it most difficult to ignore because she said they often reflect badly on her children's school regardless of a lack of truth to the postings. Sarah said:

> Recently, a parent posted about a teacher who had a different experience with the teacher than I did. What the parent was saying was so different from my experience, and it honestly made me very mad. Parents need to remember that teachers are investing in our kids, and you have to hope that if a teacher is working at a Christian school then they are called and are doing their job out of passion and love. Others forget that and then post things that get taken out of context very quickly.

Sarah said she makes it her mission to correct false truths. She says it is unfortunate that posts which reflect poorly on children's school are often the most viral posts she encounters on Facebook. When asked how emotions play into reading negative posts about teachers, she replied, "Angry – you do feel emotions about what is posted. And I feel angry." She went on to talk about the calling on a teacher's life to serve, especially teachers in private schools. Her number one reason for her children to attend a private school is her hope they will receive a Christ-centered education, and that is one reason she feels as passionately as she does about supporting her children's school.

Participant 4: Justin

Justin runs a local swimming pool installation company and engages with families of varying socio-economic levels in the east Memphis area through his business. He commented about seeing yard signs advertising various schools at the homes of his clients. This led him to state, "There are so many private school choices in Memphis, and too often, which private school a child goes to is directly tied to their socio-economic status." When asked to elaborate, he explained that the more expensive homes and neighborhoods boast signs supporting the more expensive schools, while the more modest homes and neighborhoods represent the less expensive schools. He said the cost of the school had nothing to do with the quality of education the kids were receiving in his opinion.

Regarding social media, Justin said that any time someone posts on Facebook or another social media platform, people are watching and noting what is being put out there whether they comment, like, or share. When individuals post unkind things about a certain teacher or school, Justin believes there is someone out there taking note. Justin also shared his conviction that employees of the schools have a great deal of influence over a parent's private school choice and said that tougher policies on teachers' personal social media accounts should be in place. Justin states, "I am on social media solely to monitor what my employees are posting. And if my employees what some teachers post, then I would fire them." His comment references the freedom with which a particular teacher at his children's school posts polarizing political viewpoints. For Justin, the teacher's posts are too closely associated with the school and prevent the school from maintaining a politically neutral stance.

Participant 5: Amanda

Amanda's children are attending a private school for the first time during the current school year. Her choice to enroll in a private school comes after a disastrous year of virtual education through the larger Shelby County School System. For the current year, her children would have attended a Shelby County School in person, but Amanda was dissatisfied with the reviews of the local, neighborhood school that she had read from her physical neighbors' Facebook posts. She felt like her children would be in a less-than-adequate school, and so she looked for alternatives. When asked about the school climate in Memphis, Tennessee, Amanda talked about how much confusion there is because of the different school choices. She is not a Memphis native, and so making school choice decisions was not something she realized would require an extensive amount of time to research when she moved here two years ago.

She ultimately decided on the school her children currently attend because it is affiliated with her church and because many of her contemporaries have chosen the same school for their families. Amanda cites the Christ-centered educational point of view as being her number one reason for selecting her children's school.

Participant 6: Danielle

Danielle is a single mother of two boys. She confided that her children receive local area scholarships to subsidize the cost of tuition so that she can afford to send them to private school. Danielle said that many people post negative reviews of her neighborhood public school, and she wanted her children to have a different experience. By far, she says it is the Christian environment that she likes best about having her children in their private school.

When asked about social media, Danielle replied that she believes too many people give more credit than necessary to school reviews posted on personal social media pages. Danielle

said enough time and attention are not spent on the positive things a school has to offer, and that most of what is posted on Facebook is negative. However, even her peers' negative comments on Facebook do not deter her from her conviction that her children's school is the right one for them at this time in their lives. Danielle said she does not believe she is influenced in any way from social media posts, but she thinks that her friends are which is why she posts on Facebook.

Participant 7: Taylor

Taylor is a campus missionary at the University of Memphis and has her three children enrolled in the private Christian school affiliated with her home church. The school and church also happen to be very near to her home. Taylor said that navigating the Memphis school community was a daunting task when she moved to the area eight years ago. She believes that too many choices, including public, private, and charter options, contribute to the confusion among parents looking for a private school.

She said she does not think she has the same perspective regarding social media that her contemporaries do because she is so immersed in the lives of the college students to whom she ministers. Taylor shared that Facebook is becoming less important to many young adults because they see it as a place that Millennials and Gen-Xers gather to spread gossip and rumors. She said on college campuses that common social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, are less popular than in previous years, and students are starved for real life interactions.

Regarding her own contemporaries, Taylor said millennials enjoy gossiping and spreading negativity about their child's school when something happens that they believe is a poor reflection on their child. In other words, she said millennials use Facebook to draw negative attention to their child's school instead of to their child.

Participant 8: Jennifer

Jennifer is a mother to three children who are all enrolled in a private, Christian school affiliated with her church. She was adamant from the beginning of her interview that a God-centered, Bible-teaching school was of utmost importance to her. When asked about social media and any emotions she experiences when engaging on social media, she shared feelings of disgust and called Facebook "nothing more than a gossip train." She did not feel social media should influence a parents school choice decision, but that it unfortunately often does. Jennifer said, "Parents get nosy about other people's experiences, and everyone is all too willing to share what they think about teachers from the safety of social media on their cell phones."

Jennifer shared that another reason for choosing a private school, especially a smaller private school, was the ability to have more knowledge of what was going on in her children's lives. The smaller community allows her to know the families of her children's friends, even if they do not attend the same church.

Participant 9: Kayla

Single mother of one child, Kayla seemed stressed and distracted when she arrived at the interview. Her son attends school at a local private school where she is an alum. Kayla says that her status as an alumnus weighed less in her decision to enroll her child at the school than the fact that the school teaches from a biblical worldview. She shared that as a single mother she needs the school's support to emotionally support her son, and she believes that he gets what he needs from the caring teachers he has.

Kayla scoffed at Facebook, in general, and shared the idea that Gen-X is who "ruined" the platform when they were initially allowed accounts. She said that she gets disgusted when she logs on, especially when she sees other parents writing unkind reviews about her son's

school. Kayla believes that too often "keyboard warriors get brave behind their keyboards and say things they would never say to someone in real life." To her it is the "keyboard warriors" that post reviews of places like private schools that cause a stir in the affiliated community.

Data Analysis and Findings

Open Coding

Initial coding, or open coding, initiated the coding process. Using Atlas.ti (QDA software - atlas.ti, 2021), the researcher reviewed all transcripts, including those from one-one-one interviews as well as the focus groups, and assigned codes to various phrases and themes identified in the data. The researcher also applied open coding to field notes as a point of comparison to transcribed data recordings. The following chart shows the list of initial codes and the number of times they were assigned throughout the 13 hours of transcribed interactive dialogue. An explanation of the meanings behind each code is provided in Appendix I.

Table 2
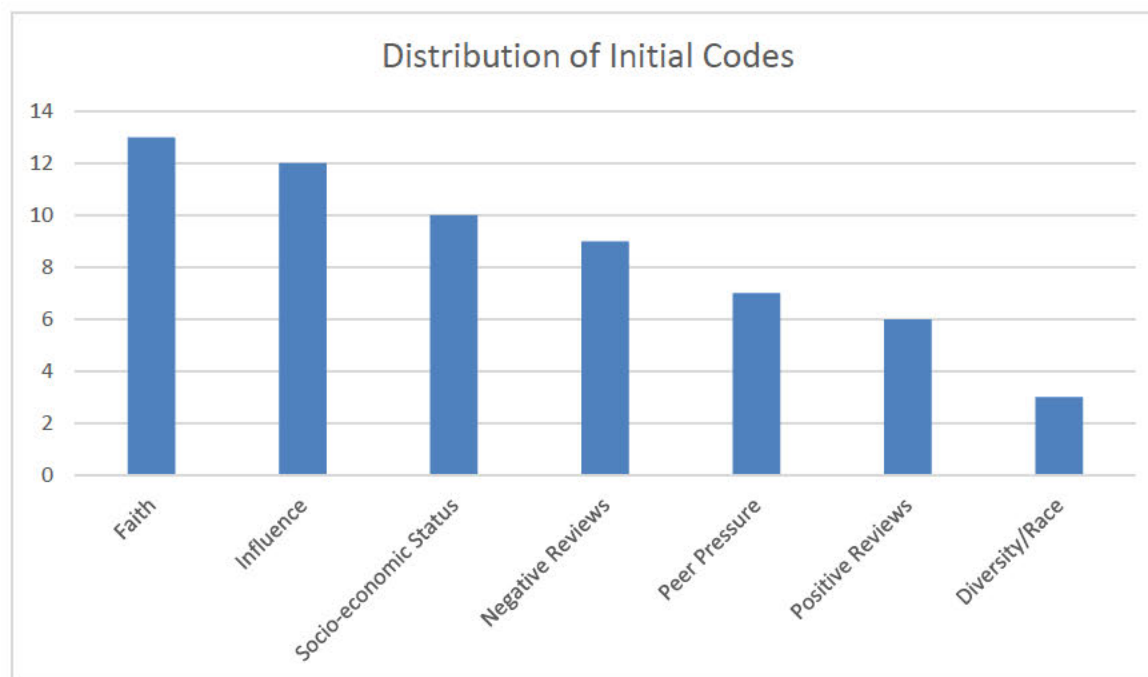
Initial codes were then classified as expected codes, surprising codes, and codes of unusual interest (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This researcher classified codes that were anticipated considering the overarching subject matter and research questions as expected codes. Codes that the researcher found surprising based on the research questions and interview topic list were also sifted into a group. One code was found to be of unusual interest given that the research project had no bearing and did not intend to explore the topic. A table of codes, by category, is provided.

Table 3

Expected Codes	Surprising Codes	Codes of Unusual Interest
Pressure	Faith	Diversity/Race
Positive Reviews	Socio-economics	
Negative Reviews		
Faith		

Axial Coding

The second stage of coding, axial coding, allowed the researcher to narrow codes identified in open-coding and find one central idea upon which the others stemmed. Figure 1 shows the completed analysis from axial coding and marks social media reviews as the hub of the conversation.

Figure 1
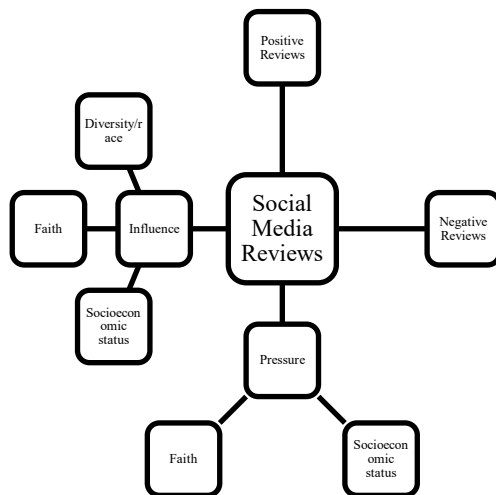
Theoretical Coding

The final stage of coding, theoretical coding, allowed the researcher to begin answering the research questions guiding the study. In addition to theoretical coding, the researcher developed a social contagion map (Christakis & Fowler, 2009) to reflect the social ties between individuals that were interviewed through the study. Figure 2 shows the relationship strands connecting the study participants.

Figure 2

Relationships Among Parents Interviewed
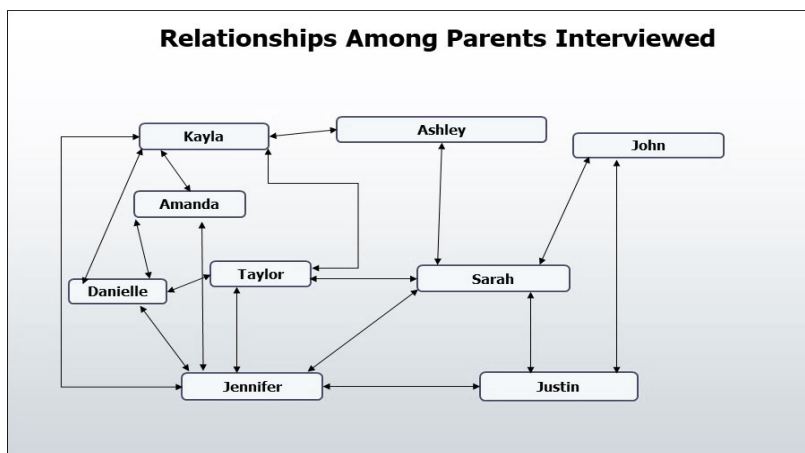
Results

This section reviews responses of participants related to influence, or social contagion, and is organized according to the research questions that guided this study.

RQ1: What online experiences on Facebook influence parental decision-making for private Christian education in Shelby County, Tennessee?

This question focused on the idea of influence as it affects a parent's decision to enroll their child in a private Christian school in Shelby County, Tennessee. Initially, most respondents disavowed the idea that they experienced any influence, either positive or negative, while they sought a private school for their child. The unstructured style of the interview process, however, allowed participants to freely discuss their decision-making steps which, when coded, reflected some degree of influence of varying types.

Specifically, during a focus group with Justin and Sarah, Justin stated, "If it leads, it bleeds." His comment was in the context of a discussion centered around social media posts that Sarah has seen complaining about specific teachers in her daughter's private school. Sarah's frustration was that her contemporaries were engaging on social media to present the teachers in a negative light rather than privately going to the teacher to work out any perceived differences. For Justin and Sarah, these negative posts directly aimed at teachers from a specific private school left an impression in their minds about the school, the school's stakeholders, such as parents and teachers, and influenced their decisions to choose the school. Sarah gave the example of friend who posted about her child's school policy for afternoon pick up and said, "[My friend] was so convinced she was right about the issue in the pick-up line that I began to think that the school itself was not doing a good job. In reality, it was one person's perception."

John called people who hide behind their keyboards and leave highly opinionated social media posts "keyboard warriors." He believes that people would rather post to their own pages about bad experiences than confront schools. John also spoke of the positive influence that comes from social media and says it is largely generated by extracurricular activities that his daughter's school offers. He concluded with the thought, "Everyone has access to a keyboard, so it is more important to me to learn what the school is offering, like extracurricular activities or a fresh approach to education."

Other parents interviewed commented on "keyboard warriors," including Kayla, a single mother of one child. She commented that too many people feel brave behind a keyboard and try to revolutionize others' thought processes about many different kinds of things. "Keyboard warriors" are friends to be wary of, according to Kayla. Taylor used the label "keyboard crusaders" and offered the thought that too much interaction on SNSs is fostering a relational disconnect among millennials. Figure 3 illustrates the social ties between individuals who either referenced "keyboard warriors" or "keyboard crusaders" in their interviews.

Figure 3
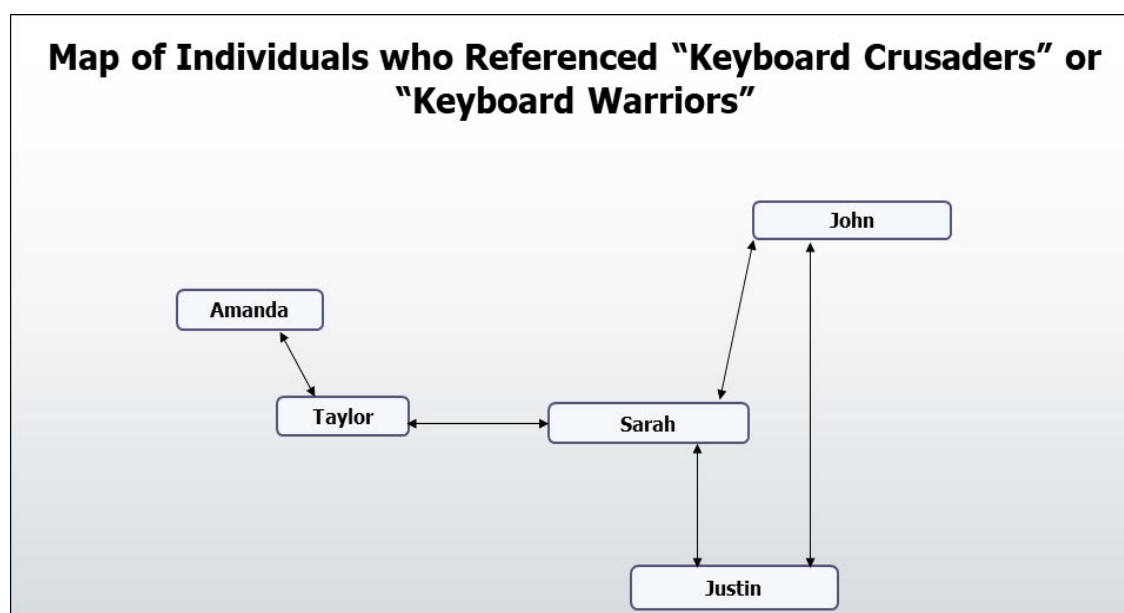
Map of Individuals who Referenced "Keyboard Crusaders" or "Keyboard Warriors"

RQ2: How do parents describe their online encounters when those encounters relate to school choice and decision-making?

This research question is closely related to the first but was seeking to learn more specifically how online encounters are described by millennials. Amanda freely admitted to desiring the same experiences for her children that her friends' children were having prior to enrolling at their private school. She said it was so easy to log into Facebook and see the ways her friends' children were engaging in school compared to those in her neighborhood attending the local public school. Amanda said, "I wanted my kids to have the experiences that my friends' kids in private school were having." For Amanda, what she saw on social media motivated her to explore what private school could offer for her family.

Single mother, Danielle, says it is hurtful to her when she sees negative social media reviews of her children's school on Facebook or other social media platforms. Her immediate response is to confront individuals who spread negative reviews of the school. Danielle also discussed how she believes she is more influenced by her friends than by social media, but then also states that she keeps up with her friends through social media. Danielle explained, "My real-life friends are usually the same as my social media friends."

Both Taylor and Sarah discussed their online encounters with teachers from their children's private schools and how those impact their opinions of the schools. Sarah said, "My kids' teachers want to be Facebook friends with them, and that is not necessarily good because then the teacher's page is a window into parts of the school that my child doesn't need to know about yet." She explains her view that a teacher's personal page becomes a reflection of the school. Taylor described instances of reading a teacher's post that was full of negativity and the

feelings it stirred in her. She said she was influenced because she does not want her children to go to a school and have a joyless teacher.

RQ3: How do parents understand their online SNS experiences as they relate to school choice decision-making?

One starting point for how parents understand their online SNS experiences comes from Kayla. She stated, "We trust the people that we know. So if people comment [on SNSs] and we know them, then we are able to decipher whether we trust their opinion based on the kind of person they are." For Kayla, then her online SNS experiences are directly tied to her relationships in real life. Taylor and Sarah deny SNS experiences as being influential to their own decision-making, but they believe that their contemporaries' SNS experiences do affect school choice decisions.

Amanda freely admits that she is intentional in who she includes in her closest circle and has a tendency to choose people with whom she engages with in real life. Her social connections from this research study bear witness to her circle being filled with other private school parents. Figure 4 shows Amanda's social connections with others in the current research study.

Figure 4

Relationships of Amanda
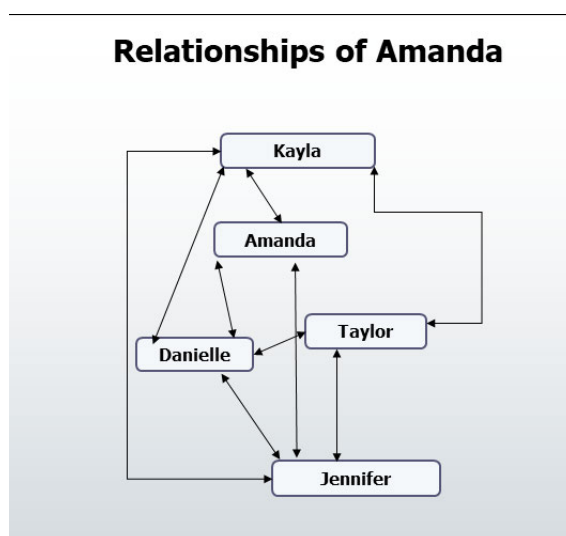
Evaluation of Research Design

Credibility

Participants initially responded to a survey on a Facebook post on the researcher's personal page to obtain a pool of interested candidates who qualified as a millennial, according the Barna group (Stone, 2017) definition. At this stage, the researcher did not include interview topics, but rather offered the overview that the research project would be related to social media and school choice in Shelby County, Tennessee (Appendix E). The researcher obtained email addresses from the survey which were then used to provide potential participants with the Participant Acceptance Letter (Appendix B) and Informed Consent Document (Appendix C). A link was also provided for the participant to schedule an interview time which would best suit their own schedules.

There were 26 respondents to the survey, and of the those, 15 were eligible for the study based on the year of their birth and their self-reported time spent on social media. From the fifteen eligible participants, nine scheduled interviews. Each interview lasted from 45 minutes to 90 minutes. From the nine individuals interviewed, two focus groups were formed. Each focus group consisted of three individuals.

Some interviews were conducted in person, at a local coffee shop, during a quiet time, and were audio recorded. Audio recordings were uploaded to the web-based transcription service, *Transcribe by Wreally*, and then downloaded to an encrypted thumb drive and stored securely in the researcher's private home office. Other interviews were conducted via web-based video conferencing platform, Zoom, and were recorded for upload to the researcher's personal, password protected laptop and then uploaded to the transcription service. Transcripts were then downloaded to the encrypted thumb drive for storage.

Transcripts were also uploaded for analysis and coding to a web-based software program, Atlas.ti, and once coding was complete, all uploaded transcripts and field notes were deleted from the password protected cloud.

Focus groups were conducted using Zoom, transcribed using *Transcribe by Wreally*, and uploaded for analysis to Atlas.ti. Once analysis was complete, all data was deleted from the cloud and then stored on the encrypted thumb drive which only the researcher has access to.

Codes were then assigned to the research and the research questions were applied to the data collected.

Dependability

This study utilized handwritten field notes for the researcher to match to interview transcripts and to focus the interviews from the perspective of the researcher as it unfolded. Transcribed interviews and focus groups rounded out the data collection for the study. Open coding, axial coding, and selective coding are the three stages of coding which guided this study. Topics and various points of clarification guided the focus group portion of the study to ensure accuracy and the researcher's understanding of certain themes that had surfaced during the interviews. Appendix G includes list of topics for the focus groups which were developed from the interviews.

Confirmability

Member checking, or affirming the researcher's understanding of the discussion, was employed during focus groups by asking probing questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hays & Singh, 2012). This study's reliance on detailed participant responses, including quotes from interviews and focus groups, reported in the data also lends confirmability to the study since it was presented in this paper as directly as possible. Hays and Singh (2012) report, "Achieving

confirmability means the degree to which interference from the researcher was prevented" (p. 201). Transcripts and encrypted data will be kept for three years for future confirmability.

Transferability

Results and data could be transferred to other contexts, such as selection of a church, particularly in an area with a high concentration of churches. The potential for research regarding millennial opinions and potential for crowdsourcing related to church selection made more easily accessible through SNSs is an area of future study for which the current study could provide a model.

<div align="center">

Chapter Summary

</div>

This research study explored perceptions that millennials' have of social media influence and how influence acts as a social contagion for school choice decisions. Participant interviews and focus groups provided descriptions of the experiences millennials in Shelby County, Tennessee, have when faced with the myriad of school options in the community. Centered on influence, through both positive and negative reviews, each participant offered firsthand, relevant anecdotes to the subject being studied. Nine individuals participated in one-on-one interviews, and of those nine, two focus groups of three people each were conducted to confirm findings from the original interviews.

Chapter Five: Conclusions

Overview

This chapter provides details to the conclusions to be drawn from the study. The research purpose is revisited in this chapter along with the research questions. Conclusive summaries are provided for each research question based on data collected and reported in Chapter Four. Research limitations are also acknowledged in this chapter. Lastly, the chapter will address the potential for future research which can be drawn from the current study.

Research Purpose

This study contributes to the literature by identifying to what extent millennials perceive influence across Facebook to select private Christian education. The theory guiding this study is the theory of connectivity through social networks, as proposed by Christakis and Fowler (2009). An examination of Facebook as a possible conduit for social contagion as related to influencing decisions was studied. The researcher sought to ascertain information and opinions from parents who are active on Facebook and choose private, Christian schools in Shelby County, Tennessee, for their children. Drawing from Christakis and Fowler's (2009) research on social contagion, this study sought to describes how millennial parents may or may not imitate their friends in the selection of a particular private school.

Research Questions

Research questions centered on the online social media experiences of parents. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What online experiences on Facebook influence parental decision-making for private Christian education in Shelby County, Tennessee?

RQ2: How do parents describe their online encounters when those encounters relate to school choice and decision-making?

RQ3: How do parents understand their online SNS experiences as they relate to school choice decision-making?

<div align="center">Research Conclusions, Implications, and Applications</div>

Conclusions

This section details the researcher's conclusions for each research question as they relate to the underlying theory guiding the study, the theory of social contagion (Christakis & Fowler, 2009). It also delves into the implications this research has for school leaders and teachers.

RQ1. The first question asked about online experiences on Facebook that may have influenced parental decision-making among millennials to select private Christian education for the school-aged child. While parents overwhelmingly denied feeling influenced, many described experiences and feelings that can best be categorized as influence. When denying the possibility of influence in their decision-making, parents insisted they were able to make autonomous decisions and were disinclined to entertain the notion that perhaps something they read that someone else posted on an SNS had caused them to think differently. They repeatedly stood by their convictions that they were independent thinkers. In the focus group discussion regarding how teachers are portrayed, participants noted that they believed others on the thread expected them to agree with the original poster which supports Stetzer's (2018) observation that "There is little incentive for patient and nuanced discussion" (p. 25).

Participant 4, Justin, observed that whether a person was posting and commenting on Facebook was not as important as how what they were reading written by people they have some loose tie to made them feel. His comment supports Christakis and Fowler's (2009) research that

concluded everyone is influenced by everyone else in the same network to some degree.

Christakis and Fowler (2009) wrote:

> We deliberately choose to form social connections with specific individuals, with whom
>
> we share greater or lesser intimacy and affection for brief or lengthy periods of time. And
>
> unlike other social species, we have a special capacity to imagine what others are
>
> thinking and feeling, including what they are thinking and feeling about us. (p. 214)

This researcher concludes that millennial parents do not want to feel as though they are

influenced in their decision-making, while simultaneously, seemingly sub-consciously, seeking

the approval and opinions of others on SNSs. Participant 5 (Amanda), Participant 8 (Jennifer),

and Participant 9 (Kayla) referred to their network of local friends posting on social media the

accomplishments of their children. Their friends never asked them to enroll their children at the

same school, yet both talked of how the experiences their friends posted about the school made

them desire the same experiences for their own children. This relates to Christakis and Fowler's

(2009) observations about the way social networks can form niches. In a niche, shared

expectations (norms) can be passed from one person to another without the realization that one

person is influencing the other (2009). The contagion of influence passed along the social

network of the research study participants was evident and played a strong role in participants,

such as Amanda, enrolling her children in a private school.

  RQ2. The second question sought to gather rich descriptions of parent perceptions of

their own online encounters pertaining to school choice. Some respondents indicated that their

responses were either neutral or positive. However, Participant 3 (Sarah) described in detail how

frustrating it is when Facebook friends engage in what she called, "teacher bashing." She

describes how parents on her Facebook feed sometimes will say very unkind things about a

particular teacher, which then has, in her experience, caused the post to go viral. She says this causes her concern for the school with which the teacher is associated since Facebook is not a place to "air dirty laundry." Sarah's passion about the subject aligns with Stetzer's (2018) statement, "Little thought is given to whether what they are saying is true, constructive or good; the point is to generate as much as attention as possible" (p. 46). Stetzer (2018) was describing the type of Christian who is consistently seeking to plant seeds of controversary of some form on SNSs.

Participant 5 (Amanda) described how many of her friends posted so many positive experiences their children were having at a certain local private school and those postings propelled her to investigate the school and ultimately, enroll her four children.

Christakis and Fowler (2009) discuss how a person's beliefs and desires can grow and spread when someone else believes or desires the same thing. The beliefs and desires are magnified and flow more freely through network ties. This was the case with Amanda who reported reading so many social media posts of her friends whose children were in a certain private school that she became deeply interested and desirous of enrolling her own children. This illustrates what Christakis and Fowler (2009) assert: "We want what others to whom we are connected want" (p. 22).

This researcher concludes, that regardless of whether a post is positive, negative, or neutral, there is an impact to millennial decision-making as it relates to school choice. The impact may be imperceptible in one's own self since many individuals interviewed denied there being an impact at all, yet they reported making decisions stemming from social media posts related to schools. This conclusion supports the Christakis and Fowler (2009) related to the niches that form in social networks. In the social network studied in this research, the social

contagion of influence is experienced by millennial parents looking to make a school decision as it relates to selecting a private school.

RQ3. The last research question sought to describe how parents understand their online social network site experiences as they relate to school-choice decision-making. Most participants spoke of a social network experience that played a role in their decision to either enroll in a private school, or at least, have strong convictions that they did not want their child(ren) enrolled in a Shelby County Schools public school in their neighborhood.

Those who have "more connections to other people in the network via friends or friends of friends" (Christakis & Fowler, 2009, p. 13) are defined as being more embedded in the network. One example of a study participant who made school decisions based on social ties is Amanda. She is tied to three other individuals in the network whom she reports influenced her in some way to select a specific school for her children. Jennifer had social ties to six of the nine participants in the study, and therefore, is the most deeply connected of the participants studied. In this study, John was a more peripheral member of the network and reported being less influenced by social media than his contemporaries who were more deeply embedded (Figure 1).

Implications

This researcher asserted in Chapter One that a deeper understanding of social networks was necessary for stakeholders in private Christian education, such as school leaders and private school teachers. Influence flowed across the social ties depicted in this study, and therefore, this social contagion is relevant as it pertains to the selection of a private school. This study bears out the assertions of the need for a richer description of social networks and the contagions that flow across social ties when it pertains to private schools.

School leaders must be aware that a teacher's personal social network account reflects the school community where they work. John, Justin, Sarah, and Jennifer all commented that teachers are increasingly becoming social media friends with students and parents. Teacher postings have the power to influence the community with regards to the school, even when the posting is made on a personal page. The question of reciprocity, specifically of how teachers experience social contagion when parents post on an SNS, was not examined in this study. Bronfenbrenner (1979) believed reciprocity to be a key element of human development. Lower and Lowe (2018) explain:

> Reciprocal activity, reciprocal interactions, and all types of reciprocal exchanges between people in a variety of social ecological environments benefit all of the interconnected and interacting members developmentally. (p. 174).

Teachers must also be intentional in what they post. Scripture admonishes Christians to "…take every thought captive to obey Christ" (*English Standard Version*, 2016, 2 Cor. 10:5). Stetzer (2018) argues:

> Even when we think we're having a private conversation or posting random thoughts, we need to understand that others are watching our online actions and holding them up against our claims to be Christ followers. We need to see how this is connected to our witness. (p. 257)

School employees, particularly of private Christian schools, are be watched not only for how well they are following the Christ they are teaching about in their classrooms, but also for how well they treat their school, fellow staff members, and other stakeholders in the school community. The impact parents feel when teachers post online emerged as one point of interest

in this research study underscoring the importance of being mindful of one's social media presence.

Applications

Based on the research, the following applications for school leaders are offered:

1. A strong social media policy for staff and employees should be available.

2. Parents are influenced, sometimes unwittingly, by peers' posts on social media, and the school can leverage this by recruiting ambassadors who commit to posting about the school in a positive light.

3. School leaders must be mindful that everyone is watching. Participating in online discussions can feel deceptively like the only ones involved are the ones posting or commenting. However, others read and view posts without commenting. As one research interviewee shared, "social media is window looking inside a business."

Research Limitations

One limitation this researcher faced in the study is the sample size. Ideally, more participants would have been available for interviews which would have provided a deeper investigation into millennials' perceptions of social media influence as it pertains to school selection. For this study, all participants' children attended the same private school in Shelby County, Tennessee, which was not predicted in the initial design of the study but does limit the applicability of the study to parents who represent other area schools. The sample size and school represented by the sample size may affect the ability to generalize this study to other schools.

Further Research

Additional research is needed in millennials' attitudes nationally when it comes to school choice and social contagions that are present across virtual social network ties. This research

may also benefit from a quantitative analysis to further break down opinions of younger millennials compared to older millennials. Further a comparison of millennial attitudes toward social media in a different area of the country could yield different results and would be an excellent point of comparison for the researcher interested in millennial attitudes and the social contagion theory of Christakis and Fowler (2009).

<div align="center">**Summary**</div>

This research has examined the experiences of millennial parents of school-aged children enrolled in private Christian schools in Shelby County, Tennessee. A close look at the social ties between research participants and probing questions to ascertain potential social contagion related to school choice is at the heart of this research study. The ethnographical research methodology allowed the researcher to explore social ties and develop a social network map of the research participants. This chapter offered conclusions to the data that was collected and presented in Chapter Four, including the need for a greater awareness of how social media impacts a person's thoughts and decision-making.

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APPENDIX A

SOCIAL CONTAGION'S IMPACT ON DECISION-MAKING AMONG
MILLENNIAL PARENTS SEEKING A
CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

Research Participant Questionnaire

Questionnaire for interested individuals who would like to participate in a research study about the lived experience of social media interactions related to the selection of a private Christian school.

1. Please provide the following:

   Name: _____

   Email: _____

   Phone: _____

2. Date of Birth (this is used to determine a generational classification)

   DOB: _____

3. Is your child enrolled in a private school in Shelby County, Tennessee, for the 2021-22 school year?

   YES / NO

4. How many times per week do you access Facebook and/or Instagram?

   _____

5. Are you available to participate in a one-on-one interview?

   YES / NO

6. Are you available to participate in focus groups conducted over Zoom?

   YES / NO

APPENDIX B

Participant Acceptance Letter

Dear [Participant]:

Thank you for your interest in this research project on millennial parents' experiences and decision-making processes when selecting a private school for their minor child. The questionnaire you completed indicates that you meet all the criteria for the study, and I would like to officially invite you to participate in the study.

If you are interested in continuing to be a part of this study, please schedule one interview time with me using this [link]. Interviews should take approximately one hour, so please plan accordingly. Once you schedule your interview, an email confirmation with the link for the Zoom meeting will be sent. If you have difficulty scheduling an interview, please email me at

███████████████

Prior to the interview, please review the informed consent document which is included as a link to this email. If you have questions about the document, please call me at ███████ or email me at ███████████. Please download and sign the informed consent document before emailing it back to me. If you need technical help, please do not hesitate to contact me.

At the conclusion of the first interview, I will invite you to participate in a focus group.

I am committed to making your interview comfortable so that you feel safe and unjudged as you share your experiences when you were seeking a school for your child. Should you wish to withdraw from the study, you may do so at any time.

Again, I want to thank you for filling out the initial questionnaire and for your willingness to chat with me about your experiences on social media. Please contact me with any questions you may have as we move forward together in this endeavor.

Blessings,

Laura A. Farien, MAEd

APPENDIX C

Informed Consent Document

Title of the Project: Social contagion's impact on decision-making among millennial parents seeking a Christian school

Principal Investigator: Laura A. Farien, MAED, Rawlings School of Divinity, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to be a part of a research study involving parents of students enrolled at a private school in Shelby County, Tennessee, for the 2021-22 school year. Participants must be a millennial, having been born between the years of 1980 and 2004. To be a part of the study, participants must be available for a one-on-one interview and a focus group. Participants must have a social media account on Facebook or Instagram and must be willing to discuss their decision-making process as it pertains to the selection of private schools. Individuals participating in this study do so on a voluntary basis.

Please read this consent form carefully and consider any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in the study.

The Study and Its Purpose

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the literature through identifying to what extent millennials perceive any social contagion across social network sites (SNSs) to select private Christian education for their child at a specified institution.This study seeks to provide a rich, narrative, description of the experiences of millennial parents who have read Facebook or Instagram posts about their child's school and how those posts may have influenced their opinions.

Benefits to Participation

There is no monetary compensation or other direct benefit for participants who engage in this study. Participation in this study will assist school leaders in understanding the role, if any, that social media connections play in parental perception of FACS and the decision to enroll their child in the school.

This research will benefit school leaders in understanding how parents experience social media as it relates to school choice decisions. This could help private schools and other researchers to have a better understanding of the lived experiences of millennial parents who seek private education and how friends or friends' of friends may influence those decisions in some way.

What to Expect

Study participants are asked to do the following:

1. Schedule a one-on-one interview with the researcher at a time that is convenient and where participants will be uninterrupted and comfortable.
2. Be open and honest with feelings, thoughts, and perceptions experienced during the decision-making process.
3. Be available to participate in a video-based focus group to further discuss experiences.

Risks Associated with Participation

The assumed risk for participation is minimal, if at all. However, should participants become uncomfortable or wish to discontinue the interview, the interview can be terminated immediately.

Participants are free to take breaks if they feel the need.

Protecting Personal Information

All records of this study will carefully protected. Published reports will not contain any identifying information for the study, including the names of participants', their children, their Facebook or Instagram account information, their date of birth, or other information that could potentially identify the participant. Research records will be stored securely and encrypted on an external hard drive that is encrypted to further guard participants' privacy. Interviews that are published as part of the final research project will have all personal information and any other information that could potential identify the participant removed. Pseudonyms will be used for all participants for confidentiality purposes. Further, interviews will conducted at a secure and private location with safeguards in place so that shared information cannot be overheard. Interviews will be audio and video-recorded. All recorded data will be stored and encrypted on an external hard drive to guard against internet theft or hacking. Hard copies of interviews and interview notes will be secured in the researcher's home office in a locked and secured cabinet. The home office is also monitored for security by a professional home security service to guard against breaches and thefts.

At the end of three years, all research data will be destroyed.

Interview Questions

Participants are free to answer or not answer any question posed. Further, participants can conclude the interview at will.

Withdrawal Information

Participants who wish to withdraw from the study, should email the researcher at the address provided. Data collected from participants who wish to withdraw will be destroyed immediately.

Contact Information for the Researcher

Laura A. Farien is the researcher conducting the study. She can be reached at
███████████████. You may also call her at ██████████. You may also reach the
researcher's supervisor, Dr. Mary Lowe at ███████████.

A Participant's Rights as a Research Participant

For questions or concerns regarding this research project that participants would like someone
other than the researcher or supervisor to answer, please contact the Institutional Review Board
at irb@liberty.edu.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Please review the information
provided carefully and ask questions as needed to fully understand what the study is about before
signing the document. You will a copy of this document for your records. If you have questions
about the study after you have signed and the research process has begun, please contact the
researcher and/or research supervisor noted above.
*I have read and understand the above information. I have asked questions and received answers.
I consent to participate in the study.*

_____ (initials) The researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record me as a
part of my participation in this study.

_____   _____
Printed Subject Name   Signature & Date

APPENDIX D

Potential Interview Topics

1. Influence

2. Current school climate in Shelby County, Tennessee

3. Social media and Facebook

4. Emotions experienced when reading reviews of school on Facebook

5. Peer pressure to enroll in a private school

6. Reasons to choose a private school

APPENDIX E

Initial Facebook Post

I am a doctoral student at Liberty University seeking to interview parents who have children

enrolled in a private school in Shelby County, Tennessee, for the 2021-22 school year. If you are

interested in participating in my study, please complete the form below. Thank you for

supporting this endeavor.

Appendix F

IRB Email

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

August 4, 2021

Laura Farien

Mary Lowe

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-1041 SOCIAL CONTAGION'S IMPACT ON DECISION-

MAKING AMONG MILLENNIAL PARENTS SEEKING A CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

Dear Laura Farien, Mary Lowe,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in

accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug

Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review.

This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in

your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations

in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR

46:104(d):

Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests

(cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or

observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording).

Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably

place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial

standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation.

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be

found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study

on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the

consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information

electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available

without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any

modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification

of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification

submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether

possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email

us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

Research Ethics Office

APPENDIX G

Focus Group Topics

1. Ascertain if participants know one another.

2. Emotions experienced when reviewing online social media posts about their child's

    private school.

3. Influence as a social contagion.

APPENDIX H

Code Book

The following identifies meanings associated to the codes developed in the research project.

Code	Associated Meaning
Faith	Comments related to the Bible, their faith, biblical worldview teaching, gospel-centered education
Influence	Comments related to what or how a parent was influenced to choose a private school as it pertains to the opinions of others in the community
Socio-economic Status	Participant concerns related to the financial means of parents at their child's school or parents of other private schools who they know
Negative Reviews	Comments related to negative reviews read and noticed on Facebook, including formal reviews and informal comments and posts
Positive Reviews	Comments related to the positive reviews read and noticed on Facebook, including formal reviews and informal comments and posts
Peer Pressure	Participant perceptions of the pressure they feel when selecting a private school for their child
Diversity / Race	Comments related to racial and ethnic diversity as it pertains to parental perception of choosing a private or public school