

**The Asbury 2023 Outpouring as Characterized Through Social Media & it's Effects on
Influencing Enrollment Rates**

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Abstract

In attempts to find if there is a correlation between student enrollment to Asbury in fall of 2023 and the Outpouring as portrayed on social media, understanding factors such as student enrollment, the nature of revivals and outpouring, and how college students interact with social media is essential. In the United States, there is a history of periods of revivals that have taken place on college campuses, including Asbury University, where God's people experienced His presence and might magnified for (Beougher, 2002; Hayward, 2016; McLaughlin, 2013; Morley, 2015; Pratt, 2001; Randall, 2010). These experiences played a significant role in shaping the students involved spiritually, individually, and communally (Hoelscher 2021). Students grouped into Generation Z have grown up in a world of media, interacting with it frequently and varying in their scope of trust over such media platforms (Al-Harrassi & Al-Badi, 2014; Euajorusphan, 2021; Hruska & Maresova, 2020; Lewis, 2009; PrakashYadav & Rai, 2017). This variety of trust in media certainly could affect students' willingness to trust media coverage over the Asbury Outpouring in February of 2023. Factors that make up students' college decisions often fall in economic and sociological categories (Cummings, Hayak, & et. al, 2004; Hossler & Bontrager, 2014; Hossler & Vesper, 1999), but with an outpouring inadvertently marketing Asbury University as a college choice this could have become a factor for students looking into a Christian University.

Literature Review

History of Revival within the United States

Researching the history of religious revivals provides insight into the nature and character of revival. Revivals can be described as an intensification of God's presence which leads His people to experience Him in new ways and have a heightened sense of awareness of His spirit and an increased participation in spiritual practices (Beougher, 2002; Hayward, 2016; McLaughlin, 2013; Randall, 2010). Spiritual practices in this instance are prayer, the pursuit of holiness, and worship (Randall 2010). Revivals are often identifiable by a recent spiritual decline, long-awaited prayers for revival, evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence, and controversy over miracles and healings (Morley, 2015). Revivals often impact one's personal spiritual growth and relationship with God, but they are also a time of unity and communal bonding (Beougher, 2002; Hayward 2016; Hoelscher 2021). America has experienced two significant revivals, called the Great Awakenings (Morley, 2015). Significant revivals not only change the church, but they can also shape and change the climate of the culture around them (McLaughlin, 2013). Both Great Awakenings were times of major conversion to Christianity and times of great repentance (Morley, 2015) as well as times of personal life transformation. The lives changed during revival were a testimony in themselves to the spreading of revival, as others deeply carved the change and transformation they saw happening in Christ's followers during these seasons of revival (Hayward, 2016; Beougher, 2002). These were not the only important revivals or great movements of God in American History. The Jesus Movement of the '60s and '70s, a call to turn toward Jesus and away from drugs and sex, was hugely impactful in college-age students (Morley, 2015; Pratt, 2001). The movement even led to an outbreak of revival on Asbury University's campus (Morley, 2015; Pratt, 2001). Great moves of God have had a great impact

on college campuses in the course of revival history, and have even been impactful to the development of college-age students who experienced revival (Hoelscher 2021).

Social Media and College Students

Generation Z, the generation now representing young adults in the workforce, college students, and even high school students, has been raised in a world of instant technology. They have always had social networking opportunities at their fingertips (Euajorusphan, 2021). Evaluating how Generation Z, particularly college students, uses social media, and what its implications are for the real world provides helpful insight into the societal world that is being shaped today. It is important to note that just a little over ten years ago, in a study done by A. Al-Harrasi and A. Al-Badi, sixty-nine percent of students owned an iPhone and engaged with social networks, an increase of forty-two percent of students in just three years (2014). Not only is smart technology and social networking a vital piece of society today, but it has been a rapidly growing industry. It is interesting to note that there is a positive linear relationship between students going for higher education and the increased use of social networking sites (Hruska & Maresova, 2020). This correlation likely influences Generation Z's predominately using social media sites for research, although they also use it for mass communication just as much (Al-Harrassi & Al-Badi, 2014; Euajorusphan, 2021). Social media outlets that students use that have been researched include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and various other media outlets that are now considered outdated (Al-Harrasi & Al-Badi, 2014; Hruska & Maresova, 2020). Though students engage with media and social interactions on these sources, they do not necessarily put their full trust in these networking outlets. A negative to social networking is information overload and mistrust of media information (Al. Harrassi & Al-Badi, 2014; Lewis, 2009; PrakashYadav & Rai, 2017). As of 2014, thirty-five percent of students in the Harrassi &

Badi study outright said they distrust the media, while forty-seven percent said they were unsure as to whether or not they trusted the media. Meanwhile in a study performed by B. Lewis investigating the difference between students studying media (Public Relations) and students studying other majors, it was found that students studying in media are far more likely to trust media than other students (2009). This could indicate a correlation in trust growth as usage increases, but the reasonings for these findings are yet to be tested. Beyond trust in media, social media is changing the way of the real world and how interactions take place in person. While media helps connect family and friends, crossing proximity barriers, it is creating an increase in social anxiety and even causing user isolation (PrakashYadav & Rai, 2017). Additionally, those who do trust in media are more likely to participate in self-disclosure regularly through media outlets (PrakashYadav & Rai, 2017). While not inherently a bad or good thing to do online, it has its dangers in the form of the media's inability to always guarantee privacy and further contributing to an inability to share verbally in the real world.

College Student Enrollment

Research on the process by which students decide to move forward in higher education and where they decide to pursue this education is scarce. While there is little absolutes on this topic there are several theories revolving around the process of decision making. There are however definite shifts in enrollment rates that have taken place over the last fifty years. Prior to World War II, college wasn't nearly as sought after as it is today, and often in this time higher education was a pursuit of prestige rather than desiring genuinely further education (Cummings, Hayak, & et. al, 2004). Decisions on going to college were heavily affected by political policies, for instance the Higher Education Act of 1965 led to an uptake in student college enrollment (Cummings, Hayak, & et. al, 2004). While government policy still can play a role in college

choice, today pursuit of college is far more popular and is largely influenced by other factors. These factors include economic, sociological, and informational considerations (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014). These are theorized factors that researchers are reasonably predicting drive students' decision making process on college choice, a choice which can often be broken down into three stages: predisposition, search, and choice (Hossler & Vesper, 1999). Students are predisposed to a college choice based on their families history with education, and their background of upbringing (Hossler & Vesper, 1999). Once moving beyond these considerations, students then enter a stage of discovery where they evaluate their options, weighing the costs and rewards of their universities of choice, and then the schools they are actually accepted into (Hossler & Vesper, 1999). Then, students finally make a decision based on real choices or options, this takes into consideration their academic performances and socioeconomic status of what they realistically could choose for their higher education seeking (Hossler & Vesper, 1999). The theorized factors that play into the considerations in the final choice stage of college decision are not surprising. The economic approach to decision making follows similar principles to the communication theory of social exchange theory. Students evaluate the cost and reward of their potential relationship with this university, and decide if the reward outweighs the cost (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014). The costs can refer to actual finances but it can take into consideration other costs such as distance or opportunities (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014). The sociological approach of evaluation is similar to the economic approach of weighing options, but it operates in cultural and social considerations (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014). And lastly, students can base decision making off of information processing, meaning they can evaluate the given data, or even consider the lack thereof, and make an informed decision based on the known facts (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014).

Research Questions

Research Question 1: How did social media characterize and spread awareness of the Outpouring?

Research Question 2: What was Social Media's representation of the Outpouring influence on coming to Asbury Fall 2023?

Research Questions 3: Did Social Media's representation of the Outpouring influence your expectations of your time at Asbury? And if so, how so?

Methods

In order to answer the three dominant research questions the team is researching, we will conduct two focus groups and offer a population-wide survey. The purpose of the focus group is to gain a base understanding of the thoughts and feelings of a sampling of individuals within the population being studied in regards to how social media characterized the Outpouring and if that played a role in their decision to enroll at Asbury. Through the realizations and the discoveries made in the two focus group discussions, our team will then create a survey appropriate to the responses that were given during the focus group. The survey will be made available to the entire population. The population for our research is all Asbury first-semester freshmen and transfer students. The entire population is accessible to offer the survey but will be based on voluntary responses. Likely, the entire population will not participate in the survey, but the entire population has equal access and opportunity to participate in our data gathering process.

Our focus group is the first method of research we must conduct, as the results will shape our written survey that will later be distributed. We will send out an invitation through emails and posting of flyers to invite the entire designated population (as identified earlier) to voluntarily attend our focus group session, making them a volunteer sample. The focus groups

will be approximately 1 hour to 1 hour and 15 minutes in duration. We will ask the volunteers a series of five discussion questions that will help get at our three main research questions. These discussions

1. How did you hear about the Outpouring in February 2023? Did social media play a role in you hearing about the Outpouring?
2. How did social media characterize the Outpouring? What were the messages like? What questions about the Outpouring did they raise?
3. Did you come to the Outpouring? If so, was it different from social media depictions of it? If so, in what ways did it differ? In what ways was it the same?
4. Did the Outpouring influence your decision to attend Asbury? If so, in what ways?
5. What are you hoping for now that you are attending Asbury? What expectations did you bring?

Our hope is to have twelve volunteers at each focus group session, and we will consider a valid volunteer number to be able to conduct the focus group six volunteers. An accurate representation of the whole population will be a volunteer sample that is 60% female and 40% male and remains proportionate to the freshmen-transfer ratio. After the focus group is conducted, which will be recorded in an audio file and a visual file, we will transcribe the discussions using Otter.ai and then will code the discussion and look for any recurring themes that come out of the focus groups. We will be looking for themes surrounding the concepts of social media and the outpouring (such as how did social media shape perceptions or characterize the outpouring), as well as if this played any role in students choosing Asbury. The names of students will remain anonymous in the research reporting and any published information, and students will be given a confidentiality form to sign and will be bound to confidentiality. It is

important to note that we will advertise and offer free cookies and coffee at the focus groups as a form of reward for voluntary participation. If not enough students participate in the first round of focus groups, Dr. Shores and Dr. Anderson will also offer their classes extra credit for attending the focus group as a reward for participation to increase volunteers.

We will then compose and distribute our survey (which will be based on a likert scale) once the findings from the focus group are found. We will distribute the survey via email and we will offer the reward of entering everyone's name into a raffle to win a gift card, in which there will be only one winner. The survey will be a volunteer sampling, which as earlier stated, will be made accessible to the entire population in question. Prior to the distribution of the survey, there will be a small test sample, chosen at random sampling, to sample the test for validity and reliability. Once the test is determined to be composed of valid questions, it will then be distributed as thus outlined. Like the focus group, an accurate representation of the whole population will be a volunteer sample that is 60% female and 40% male and remains proportionate to the freshman-transfer ratio. The survey responses will be self-reported and responses will again be coded for recurring themes by the communication research team. Information will again be kept confidential and students' identities will remain anonymous in the report of the findings. After all the research methods have been conducted and research is obtained and the report is written, all participants of the research study will receive the results of the study.

In a brief explanation, Our research methods will help us uncover whether our hypothesis can be rejected or is highly plausible. The hypothesis is that social media will be a factor in students finding out about the Outpouring and that it will likely have influenced individuals' conceptions of what the Outpouring was in terms of legitimacy, affect, and impact. By a

volunteer sample of 7-12 students per focus group and hosting two focus groups we will be able to identify recurring themes in perceptions around the Outpouring and social media's depictions of the Outpouring and if the Outpouring was a factor influencing student's choosing Asbury as their college of choice. Then, we will be able to compose and distribute a survey that will be offered to the entire population and will be a volunteer sample of whoever is willing to participate in the research. This survey will help further uncover trends and recurring themes surrounding the elements of our hypothesis and research questions.

Heard about it through	n
Word of Mouth	21
Social Media	22
Forms of Social Media	7
Facebook	1
Tiktok	4
Instagram	
Social Media Influencers	3
Articles	7

Table 1

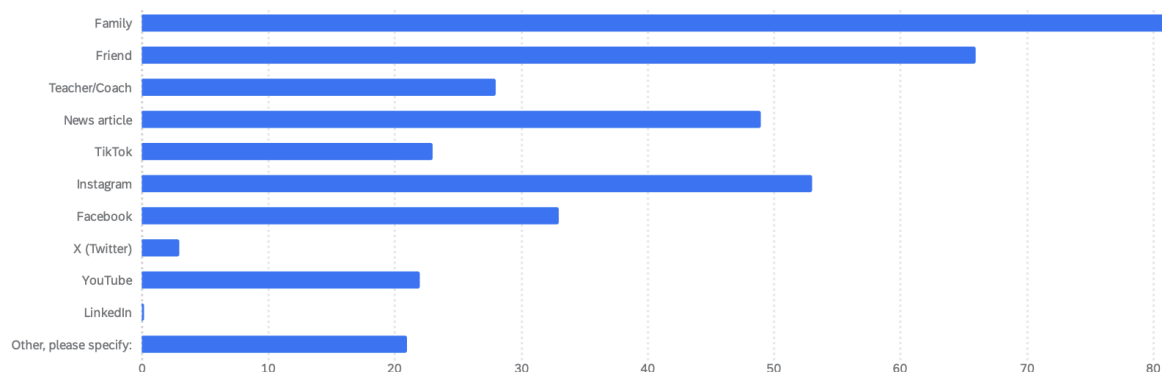
First Reaction with The Outpouring	n
Aroused curiosity/interesting	12
skepticism/reservations	5
Real deal, amazing, cool	35
Felt disconnected	5

Table 2

Overall Feelings with The Outpouring	n
Doubt/Skepticism to Believe in Legitimacy	6
Reservations About Impact	2
Life Changing Event	6
Social Media's Influence	3
Causation of coming to Asbury University	2

Table 3

What ways did you hear about the Outpouring? (choose all that apply) 131 ⓘ



What ways did you hear about the Outpouring? (choose all that apply) 131 ⓘ

Q10 - What ways did you hear about the Outpouring? (choose all that apply) - Selected Choice	Percentage	Count
Family	65%	85
Friend	50%	66
Teacher/Coach	21%	28
News article	37%	49
TikTok	18%	23
Instagram	40%	53
Facebook	25%	33
X (Twitter)	2%	3
YouTube	17%	22
LinkedIn	0%	0
Other, please specify:	16%	21

Figure 1

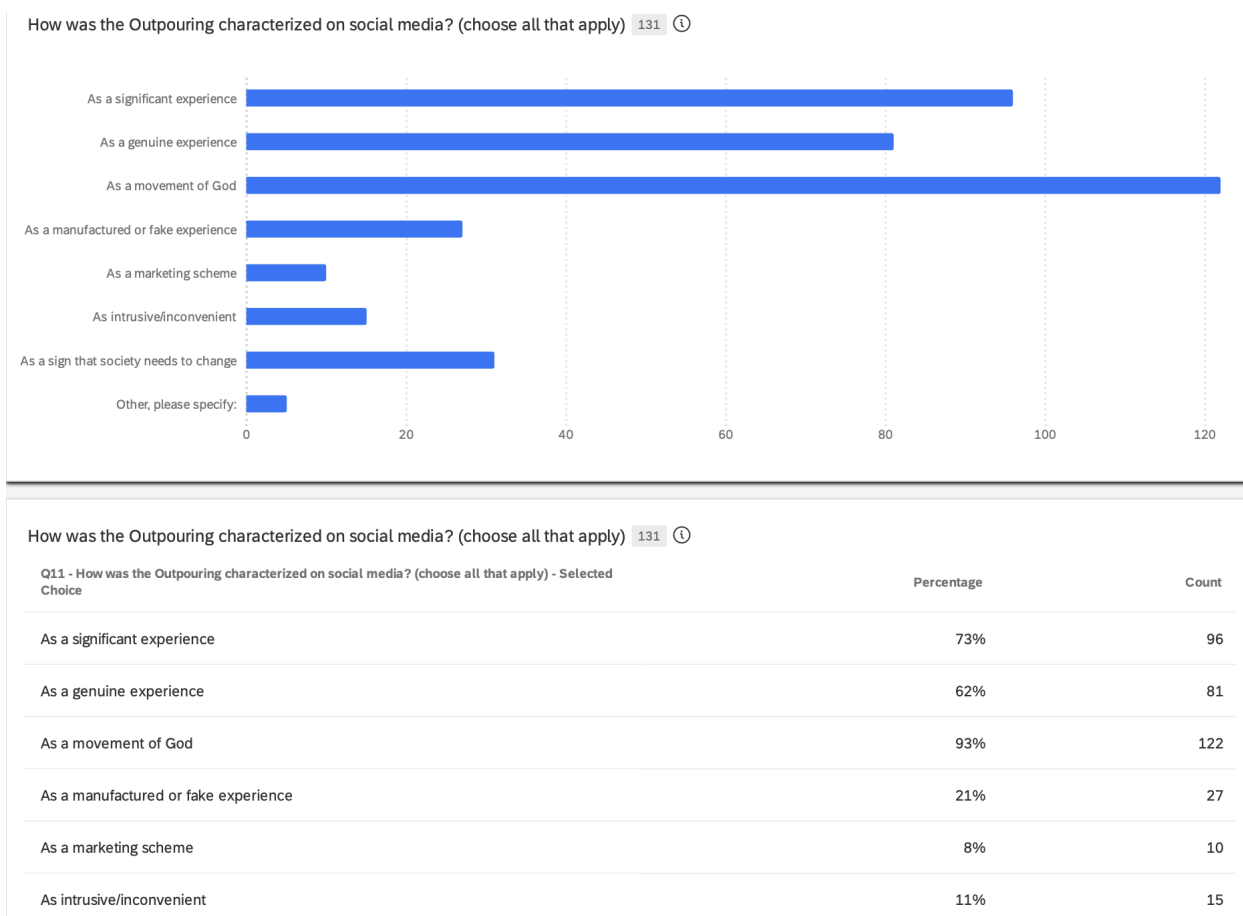


Figure 2

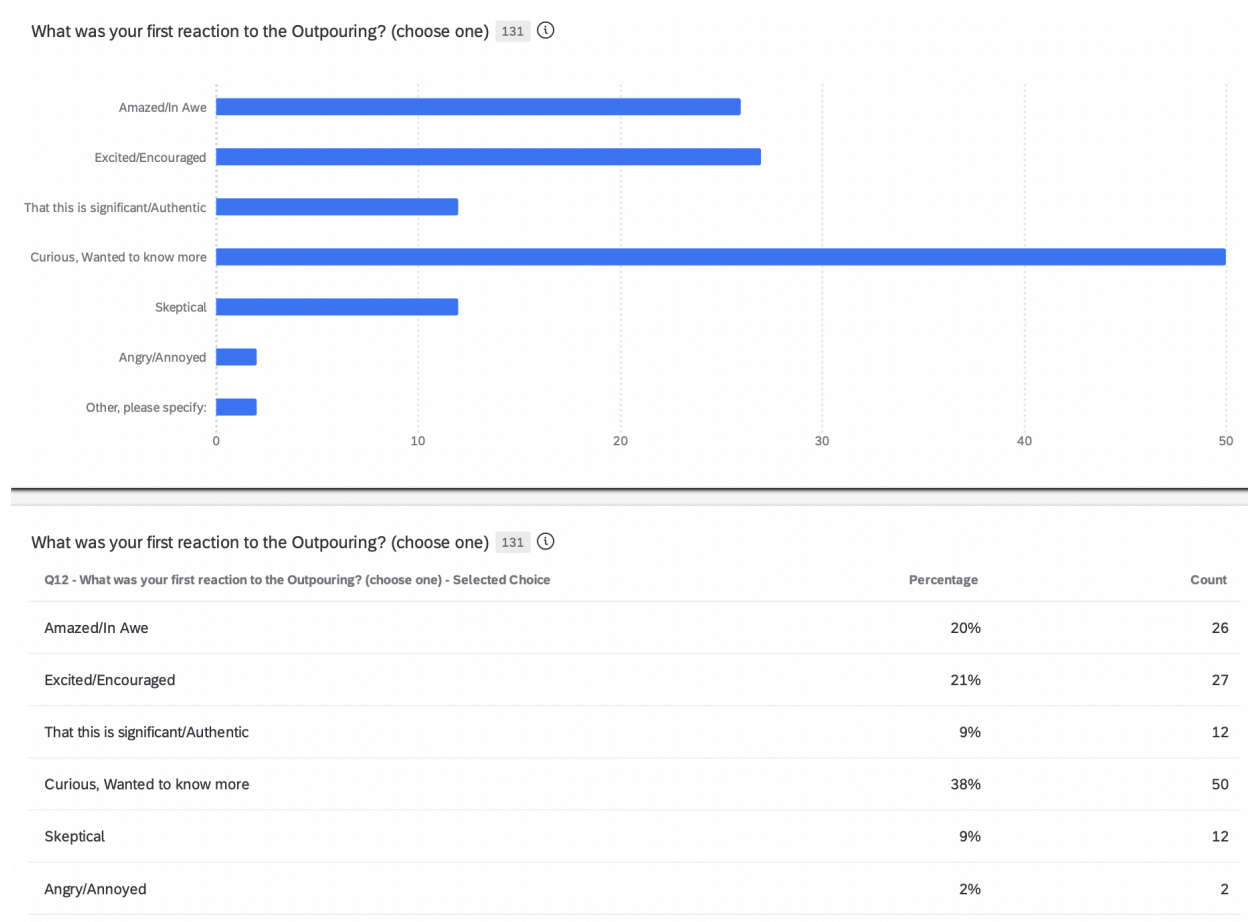
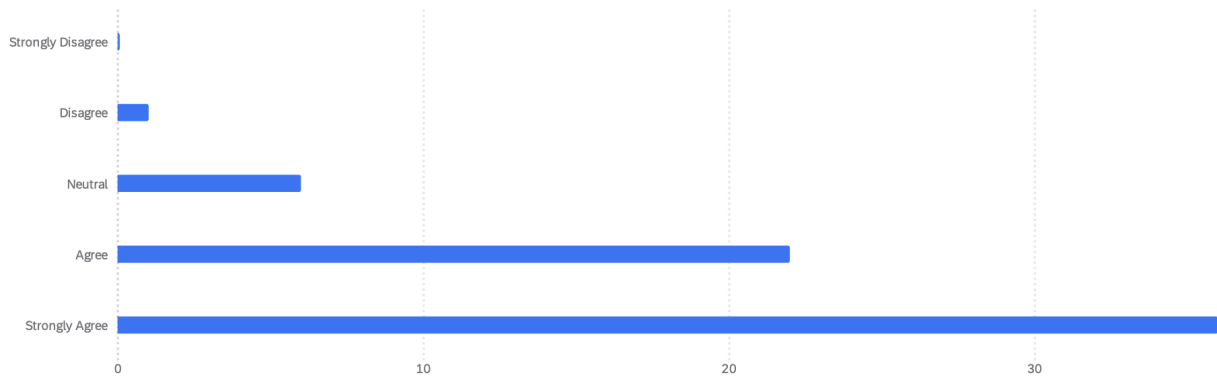


Figure 3

If you attended, was the Outpouring a positive experience? 65 ⓘ

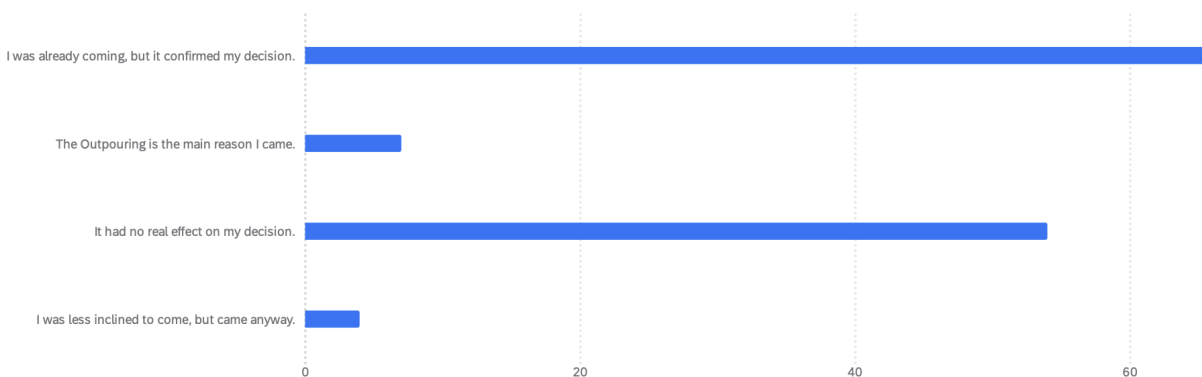


If you attended, was the Outpouring a positive experience? 65 ⓘ

Q14 - If you attended, was the Outpouring a positive experience?	Percentage	Count
Strongly Disagree	0%	0
Disagree	2%	1
Neutral	9%	6
Agree	34%	22
Strongly Agree	55%	36

Figure 4

What effect did the Outpouring have on your decision to attend Asbury? (choose one) 131 ⓘ



What effect did the Outpouring have on your decision to attend Asbury? (choose one) 131 ⓘ

Q15 - What effect did the Outpouring have on your decision to attend Asbury? (choose one)	Percentage	Count
I was already coming, but it confirmed my decision.	50%	66
The Outpouring is the main reason I came.	5%	7
It had no real effect on my decision.	41%	54
I was less inclined to come, but came anyway.	3%	4

Figure 5

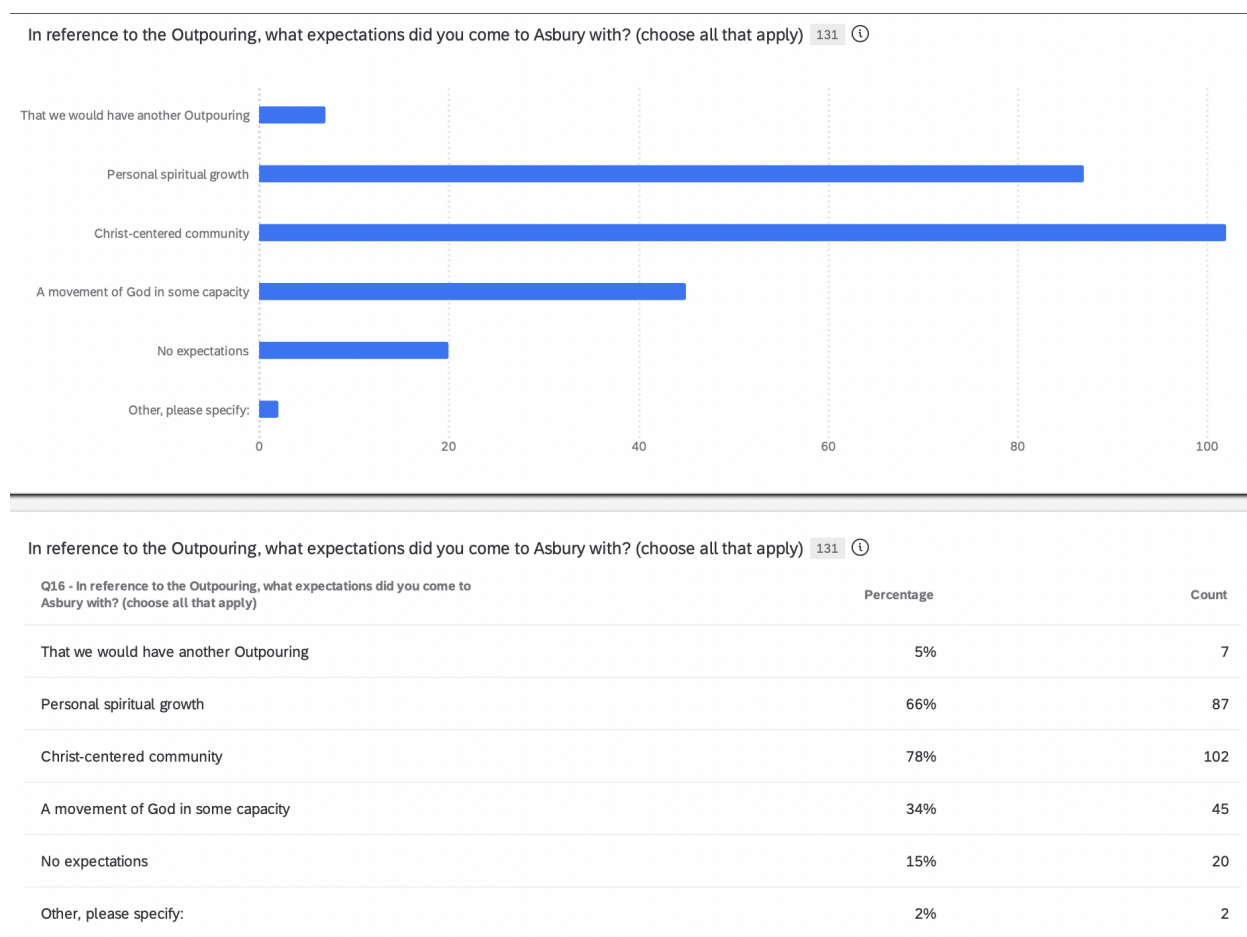


Figure 6

Results

Focus Group

The first group of focus groups consisted entirely of freshmen students (7) who were in the age range of 18-19 years old, while the second focus group consisted of both freshmen (8) and transfer (2) students and the age range covered a wider variety of 18-63 years old. Most participants in both studies were white and of U.S. cultural background, with some other cultural representation from kids who grew up in the mission field, and, one student from Asia. The gender representation was roughly equal in both focus groups.

As Table 1 reveals there were just as many mentions of news of the revival spreading from word of mouth as by social media. The majority of people from the focus group shared that

the footage they saw of the outpouring on social media had depicted the outpouring in a mostly positive way. Negative depictions that were mentioned tended to be instances in which the viewer felt unsettled rather than the content being explicitly negative. An example of this was a TikToker who situated the camera on herself while worshiping at the Outpouring, which the focus group member expressed made her feel unsure of the genuineness of the event. A significant amount of reference was made to social media characterizing the outpouring as being a huge deal, as seen in table 2, both among the Christian community and even the non-Christian community. The reference to how important and big of a deal the event was is the most frequently mentioned wording to characterize the outpouring, which is important to note and be aware of. It was also an event that sparked a lot of curiosity and intrigue for many who came in contact with the social media coverage, as seen in table 2. Lastly of noteworthy mentions for the characterization of the outpouring from social media is that some shared in the focus group that they felt skeptical of the event, as Table 2 indicates. Some of the ways in which the Outpouring was depicted influenced these feelings of skepticism whether that was videos that seemed to be more self gratifying than anything else, or, seeing things that felt potentially fabricated.

In the entirety of the 17 people that were involved in these two focus groups, only 2 people answered yes when asked if the Outpouring was the reason for their enrolling at Asbury University, indicated in Table 3. This means only 11.8% of those in our focus groups identified the Outpouring as the reason they are currently enrolled at Asbury. Another note to this percentage is that both of the focus group members who are enrolled at Asbury because of the Outpouring are above the traditional college age. The majority of other students apart of these focus groups indicated that while the Outpouring did not impact their decision to enroll at Asbury University, it did help most feel affirmed in their decision to attend Asbury or give them

peace regarding this decision. There was an instance or two where the students felt uneasy about their decision after the Outpouring, but they decided to continue in their enrollment.

Our Research team was curious regarding the expectations the Outpouring may have set for the incoming class of students. There was no concrete recurring results to this question from the focus groups. However, there were quite a few mentions of the Outpouring not creating any sort of expectation among many of the students in the focus group. Those who expressed having reservations on the impact of the Outpouring, as seen in Table 3, expressed some expectation of the campus not be marked by this event and it having little to no affect on the daily life of students. They did not make much of a mention of how they felt this expectation's reality was going so far in their time on Asbury's campus.

Survey

The survey received 131 responses, of which 113 identified themselves as freshmen and 17 identified themselves as transfer students. Like the second group of the focus group, the survey spread across a larger age spectrum than a traditional undergraduate age, 4% identifying themselves as older than 24 years old and 96% identifying themselves as falling in the range of 18-23 years old. There was a bit more of a disproportionate representation of genders, only 27% of the responds identified themselves as male, while 73% identified themselves as female. The large majority of students who responded are from the United States, making up 91% of the origin of the respondents, 9% identifying that they grew up in a different country of origin.

Figure 1 reveals that social media certainly played a role in the spreading of the news of the Outpouring, yet the impact of word of mouth from family, friends, teachers, and coaches also played a very significant role in people hearing of the Outpouring. Figure 2 reveals some of the depictions of the Outpouring as characterized on Social Media. The top three options in which

the Outpouring was characterized by Social media was as a movement of God (122 selections), a significant experience (96 selections), and as a genuine experience (81 selections). The other three options (observable in Figure 2) were more negative depictions, although they did not receive nearly as many selections as the top 3 to characterize the Outpouring. It is worth noting the initial reactions of those who came in contact with social media's coverage of the Outpouring. Figure 3 shows that the top selection of choosing one feeling upon initial reaction was just of curiosity and a desire to know more, making up 38% of the responses. The next most frequent response of initial reaction was excited and encouraged (21%) and then amazed/in awe (20%). It is important to note that there were a few negative responses and reactions as well to the initial contact with social media depictions although there were far less responses in support of these views.

Figure 5 displays the responses when asked if the Outpouring had an effect on their decision to come to Asbury. There were 5% of the respondents who claim that the Outpouring is the main reason for why they decided to come to Asbury, which is 7 of the 131 respondents. It should be made clear that of the respondents in this percentage there is no distinction made as to whether these 7 were all freshmen, all transfers, or a mix of the two. The Figure also helps reinforce the findings from the focus group that for many the Outpouring was more a confirmation of their decision as 50% agreed that this was their situation. The results of the survey also gave a newer perspective as 41% identified the Outpouring as having no real impact on their decision at all. It is an interesting point to note that there were 4 responses (3%) that shared the Outpouring as being a deterrent to attend Asbury, but they decided to come anyway.

The last figure, Figure 6, looks at the expectations that the freshman and transfers may have had as a result of the Outpouring. While the focus groups did not shed much light on the

topic of expectations, the survey most certainly did. The most frequently mentioned expectation was that they would find Christ-centered community here at Asbury (102 respondents). The next expectation most often agreed with was experiencing personal spiritual growth (87 respondents). A movement of God in some capacity was also an expectation that 45 responders shared they felt they were expecting. There were few that identified themselves as having no real expectations, only 20 respondents agreeing with this statement. There was also a handful who expected to see another Outpouring, a handful being only 7 respondents.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to hopefully have an accurate representation of the population of freshmen and transfer students for the 2023-24 school year and the affect of the Outpouring on their decision making to come to Asbury, as well as have a gauge of the depiction social media was portraying of the Outpouring. In the end, the demographic proposition didn't pan out to give an accurate enough representation to make the responses fit as a projection of the entirety of the population. However having 131 responses in a survey of the roughly 400 people it was sent out to is a strong numerical representation. The female to male ratio was off by roughly 15% for accuracy, and there was some discrepancy in the representation of the transfer to freshman ratio. This demographic analysis of the study does not discredit the findings, it is simply a limitation in the general conclusion of the research.

The findings from both the survey and the focus groups help indicate that the majority of social media coverage that those involved in this research experienced was predominantly positive. The Research team had some hypothesis surrounding this, that likely the media would misrepresent the Outpouring and would in turn then lead to there being more negative coverage of the Outpouring. However, at least in this context of what these students experienced, it would

appear that this was inaccurate. The descriptions used to characterize the Outpouring as seen on social media were very similar to the words used by the researchers who had actually experienced the Outpouring first hand. While this cannot be generalized to social media's depiction of the Outpouring in general, it can be said that among the current freshmen and transfer students at Asbury their exposure to the Outpouring on social media was not in any way an inaccurate depiction of what the Outpouring was like for those that were experiencing it in person.

The hypothesis of the research team was that the Outpouring did have an effect on students' decision to enroll at Asbury. While few named it as the direct causal of attending Asbury, there were many that remarked the Outpouring confirmed their decision, and many that also described it as having no real effect on their decision. Given this variation in responses the hypothesis at this point cannot be proven untrue nor can the null hypothesis be proven untrue. Considering research found in the lit review, it is no wonder how few name the Outpouring as the main reason for their attending, as a result surrounding college choice names many a factors that go into a student's decision on where to attend college. Other factors such as socio-economic, predisposition and opportunity also play a role in student's college decision and are more likely to carry more weight in the decision process than a singular event. Also, it must be taken into account that many decisions are made in the late fall, and again another wave of decisions are also made in the new year. As the Outpouring took place in February, many enrolled students would have already made this decision at this point, just as another thing to consider or a limitation to take into account when trying to answer the research questions posed in this research.

The expectations of students based off of the survey and focus group makes logical sense. If the Outpouring was being depicted to them as a significant move of God, then it is a natural conclusion to expect to experience personal spiritual growth and Christ-centered community. While there were little expectations or hypotheses surrounding the expectations of the students, there certainly were many plausible expectations that many of them carried coming into their attendance at Asbury as a result of the Outpouring. While it cannot quite be connected that the Outpouring was generally a large factor for the freshmen and transfers of the 2023-24 year, it can be said that the Outpouring certainly had an effect of what students expected when they arrived on campus.

Personal Reflections

I was honestly surprised at how little effect many expressed the Outpouring to have on their decision to attend Asbury. Considering the factors of college choice in general and then considering the time of year of the Outpouring, I do have a better understanding for why students would have expressed such little impact. I am also surprised at how accurately it sounds like the social media depictions were of the Outpouring. As someone who experienced the Outpouring first hand, I would have characterized it as an awe striking, huge deal of an event. It certainly was a move of God that drew you in, making you want to know more and understand more. From the results of both the focus groups and the surveys, it seems these were the same feelings and reactions that social media coverage emitted. I was astounded at this finding, but incredibly pleased to know that at least for those in this context they were able to experience a taste of the Outpouring in a light that was more true to the reality than not.

Further Research Recommendations for the Future

The biggest recommendation I would have for furthering this research in the future is taking the same research objectives and questions, and conducting an extension of this research when next fall semesters transfer and freshmen students. A question being, “Would having the Outpouring be before the prime time for college choice making play a role in more students being apt to identify it as a reason for their attending Asbury?”, Some further questions that could even be asked is “Did the Outpouring have any affect on your personal spiritual life?”. This question comes from the expectation expressed that personal spiritual growth would take place at Asbury as a result of the Outpouring, but the question gets at answering if the Outpouring already had an affect on ones personal spiritual growth prior to stepping foot on campus. And, in that case would students still be expectant for more growth while at Asbury?

Conclusion

This research surrounds the topic of the Asbury Outpouring of February 2023 and it’s impact on incoming Freshmen and Transfer’s decisions to attend Asbury. The research also explores the question of social media’s role in spreading the news of the Outpouring, as well as understanding how media was characterizing the Outpouring. In the end, the research revealed that there were in fact some students who claimed the Outpouring was their main reason for attending Asbury, while most students who participated in the focus groups and survey said it either confirmed their decision or did not impact their decision at all. The dominant theme of social media’s portrayal of the Outpouring was that it was significant and appeared genuine, and largely the emotions that surrounded content intake was curiosity and a desire to know more. Though students predominantly did not choose to come to Asbury because of the Outpouring, many students had expectations surrounding Asbury as a result of the Outpouring. Some students expected to experience personal spiritual growth, Christ-centered community, some sort of move

of God, and a few even expected to maybe see another Outpouring occur. Another finding regarding social media and the Outpouring was that social media did play a big role in spreading the word and knowledge about the Outpouring, however, it was not the greatest source of hearing about the Outpouring. It was in fact word by mouth through family, friends, coaches, and teachers that really informed the students in this study about the Outpouring.

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