

LAND-GRANT COLLEGE-ADMISSION WEBPAGES IN THE WESTERN UNITED
STATES: ANALYSIS OF MARKETING MESSAGES
FOR PUBLIC OR PRIVATE GOOD

by
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Abstract

Second only to the college campus visit, college-admission webpages are the most informative and persuasive marketing channel for recruiting future tuition-paying students (McAllister-Spooner, 2010). Chief enrollment officers, admission directors, and university marketing directors understand the valuable role the college-admission webpage plays in the student decision process; however, these stakeholders are uninformed about what information should appear on the webpages. Some admission stakeholders use words and images that communicate a private-good marketing message depicting the student journey to self-actualization on the college-admission webpage while other admission stakeholders display words and images that communicate public-good marketing messages such as career placement, research projects, faculty projects, and the university mission. The purpose of this qualitative media analysis (QMA) study was to help inform admission stakeholders about the current marketing messaging on eleven land-grant, college-admission webpages. The following four questions frame the qualitative study: (1) What public-good content themes emerged from analyzing eleven public, land-grant university admission webpages? (2) What private-good content themes emerged from analyzing eleven public, land-grant university admission webpages? (3) How often do public-good and private-good themes appear? (4) Which are more frequent?

Keywords: higher education marketing, college websites, college admissions, digital marketing, college recruiting, higher education public-good marketing messages, and higher education private-good marketing messages

Introduction

Chief enrollment officers, directors of admissions and university marketing managers are responsible for recruiting students to the university, and these admission stakeholders are under legitimate pressure to recruit students to institutions of higher education (IHEs). The process of recruiting students to IHEs is complex because admission stakeholders work in organizations that are driven by capitalist market practices. In the 1980s, public funding for higher education decreased while costs associated with higher education increased. Market practices began to be adopted by IHEs in the 1980s to offset the lack of funding. IHEs turned to student tuition as a form of revenue, creating a philosophical debate about the role of tuition in the higher education finance puzzle. While the high-level economic and philosophical questions confuse the recruiting process, admission stakeholders must also manage the practical recruiting questions like how to market to students on a college-admission webpage. The purpose of this research paper is to explain how issues of marketization and changing universities' mission have created an environment where admission stakeholders are confused about whether they should communicate a public or private-good marketing message to prospective students on the college-admission webpage. The introduction discusses the historical background that changed the college recruiting philosophy, and it also discusses the importance of the college-admission webpage in the recruiting process. From this discussion, it will be clear that a gap exists in the literature describing the themes of marketing messages on the college-admission webpage as a tool for college recruiting.

Marketization and Mission

The current process for recruiting students to colleges is complex because of the influence of marketization practices and changing universities' mission. During the previous four

decades, marketization arrived at IHEs, and a greater emphasis was placed on student enrollment. Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) studied marketization practices of IHEs from the 1980s until 2004. They explained that as market practices were adopted tuition became a form of revenue generation. They said, “The greatest increase in shares of institutional funds has come through raising tuition, which has heightened students’ and parents’ consumer consciousness” (p. 12). Newfield (2016), a critic of marketization, built on the previous research by Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) and explained that marketization concepts began to influence the management of IHEs in the 1980s, when US economic dominance began to slip. Because of marketization, IHEs began to rethink and questioned why higher education did not charge more for tuition to raise the bar for higher education quality because the value of college was now related to individuals’ private investment in their futures (Newfield, 2016).

The idea that marketization changed the role of tuition as a revenue generator was researched by *US News and World Report* who reported that between 1995 to 2015 “In-state tuition and fees at public National Universities grew the most, increasing a staggering 296 percent” (Mitchell, 2015). Another example of increasing tuition was studied by Mitchell, Palacios, and Leachman (2014) from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. They found that public colleges and universities increased tuition to compensate for declining funding and rising costs. They said, “Annual published tuition at four-year public colleges has risen by \$1,936 or 28 percent since 2007 – 2008 school year, after adjusting for inflation” (p. 2). Marketization and the practice of using tuition as a revenue generator has change the parameters of college recruiting.

Complicating the marketization of IHEs, many IHEs are struggling with their overall mission. For over a century, IHEs have been viewed as a public good. In Newfield’s (2016) sobering book, *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix*

Them, he discussed how the ideology of publicly funded higher education has changed. In the past, publicly funded higher education was a benefit to the larger society; however, higher education is now seen as a private good that should be obtained for individual gain. Some politicians and education leaders are calling on IHEs to return to the land of public good. Nixon (2011) called on higher education to return to the model of public good in his book *Higher Education and the Public Good: Imagining the University*. He defined public good as “a good that, being more than the aggregate of individual interests, denotes a common commitment to social justice and equality” (p.1). Arum and Roksa’s (2011) *Academically Adrift* study agreed with Nixon’s recommendation. Based on their research, they argued that IHEs should reinvest resources and planning to promote rigorous academic engagement and focus less on the students’ social experience. Other state and federal policy leaders have been urging IHEs to revert their marketing messages to highlight public-good values and to emphasize a return on public-good investment (Saichaie & Morpew, 2014). However, with increasing costs, low efficiency, highly paid faculty, unfocused curricula, and unclear learning objectives, many are calling for the role of the university to change from providing a public good to a more quasi-public-private partnership.

Lambert (2015) researched the changing missions of IHEs, and he explained the balancing act between envisioning the university as the “people’s university” where tax revenues provide a nonexcludable, nonrivalry good to the new public-private partnership where IHEs are funded and accountable to multiple stakeholders” (p. 8). This identity crisis played out in the marketing messages provided to students on college-admission webpages. Admission stakeholders may communicate messages that speak directly to the student consumer who is most interested in the self-discovery journey, while policy makers and legislators have called for

a return to the marketing messages that highlight the university experience as the public good, focusing on learning, research, and vocational training. As admission stakeholders formulate recruiting strategies, they are conflicted because of the marketization of tuition as a form of revenue and by the missions of their universities. To make the matter more complex, the admission stakeholders must also implement tactical strategies to recruit students.

College-admission Webpage

Admission stakeholders must decide the most effective tactical way to recruit prospective college students. Saichaie and Morpew (2014) found that “College and university websites are a primary means by which students learn about institutions of higher education and are essential to these organizations’ marketing practices” (p. 500). According to a study by McAllister-Spooner (2010), students ranked college websites as one of the most important sources for researching future colleges; students also reported that the features and messages on the website compelled them to submit their applications. Royo-Vela, Marcelo, Hunemund, and Ute (2016) found that 58.7% of their sample used the college website for trustworthy information about the IHE. The *2013 Marketing and Student Recruitment Practices Benchmark Report* listed the top ten most effective strategies and tactics for recruiting students. For two-year public institutions, the website was ranked as the most effective recruiting method. For four-year private and four-year public institutions, the college website was listed as the third most effective method after the campus open house and the campus visit (Noel-Levitz, 2013). The researchers definitively agreed the college-admission webpages were a primary means of recruiting students; however, some admission stakeholders are lagging behind the current trends, while other stakeholders do not know what content should appear on the college-admission webpage.

A national report on the state of college-recruitment policy stated, “Only about one-third to one-half of respondents across institution types reported having a strategic, multi-year enrollment plan that they felt good about” (Noel-Levitz, 2013, p. 1). Admission stakeholders understand the importance of the college-admission website; however, they are uninformed about what types of messages should appear on the webpages. In the *2013 Marketing and Student Recruitment Practices Benchmark Report*, 236 IHEs were asked to take a recruiting benchmark survey. The respondents were asked to rank 53 marketing tactics for effectiveness. Encouraging students to visit the website ranked third with 96.2% of respondents agreeing that the tactic was “very or somewhat effective” (2013, p. 10). College-admission webpages were, for many IHEs, the face of the institution. Managing the internet reputation of IHEs has become more complicated because of the rapid advancement of technology and the deeper interwoven changing culture and mission of the institutions (Zhang & O’Halloran, 2013).

To support the idea that admission stakeholders are confused about how to market on the college-admission webpage, Royo-Vela, Marcelo, Hunemund, and Ute (2016) studied marketing activities at IHEs. They argued that IHEs’ marketing activities need to be re-designed and adapted to student habits and preferences where the sophisticated interactive communications universe of search engines and websites was used to address the new student customer and their decision behavior. However, too few admission stakeholders understand what content messages should be communicated on their college-admission websites.

IHEs are operating with admission stakeholders who lack the necessary skills and empirical knowledge to implement tactical recruiting strategies on a tight fiscal budget. Meanwhile, the marketization practices and changing mission of IHEs— whether they service a public or private good—is being called into question by politicians, businesses, and the public.

Many opposing forces are at play in the game of student recruitment. I found a gap in the literature. Previous researchers have discussed the value of the college-admission homepages, but they have not examined what messages should appear on those webpages. No previous research has studied college-admission webpages specifically to determine if the messaging is public, private, or quasi-public-private messaging to students. More research is needed to facilitate a deeper understanding of the current practices of college-admission webpages for the admission stakeholders.

Research Questions

The purpose of the descriptive QMA study was to explore the different types of marketing messages being communicated by eleven land-grant college-admission webpages in the Mountain and Pacific time zones in the Western United States. The central research questions that guided the study were to inform college admission stakeholders about the content on college-admission webpages. The research questions were as follows: (1) What public good content themes emerged from analyzing eleven public, land-grant university admission webpages? (2) What private good content themes emerged from analyzing eleven public, land-grant university admission webpages? (3) How often do public-good and private-good themes appear? (4) Which are more frequent?

Literature Review

Literature on college website marketing focuses on the communication to different target audiences like parents, students, and donors. Little research exists to describe the types of messages that appear on these websites. This literature review has been divided into two sections. In the first section, "Changing Mission of IHEs," I reviewed the literature that highlighted the changing nature of IHEs from public good to private good to something in

between. In the second section, "IHEs Marketing and Webpages," I reviewed literature on how IHEs marketed to students using general marketing frameworks. The idea that webpages can be used for public or private-good messaging is also introduced as I reviewed literature on website accessibility for underserved populations. I also discuss how webpages serve as a valuable tool for college recruitment. The evidence from the literature review affirms that webpage content themes vary across institutions.

Changing Mission of IHEs

Admission stakeholders are under pressure to recruit large quantities of students because of increased financial concerns. After decades of partnering with corporate partners and compromising with politicians, policy makers, and university administrators, publicly funded higher education is no longer seen as a public good but rather as a private good whose primary concern is to promote individual economic prestige and gain (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Newfield, 2016; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Among the sources which served to create the foundation of this literature review were leftist critics Newfield (2016) and Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) who discussed the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of public goods and private goods. Representing a more moderate perspective were Mendoza (2012) and Lambert (2015) who provided contrasting research that showed the relationship with IHEs and markets have continued to evolve into partnerships that provide mutual benefit for IHEs and capital markets.

The seminal work of Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) argued that IHEs have shifted from the old regime of public good knowledge/learning to a new academic capitalism regime where many actors network together to oversee and fund the academy (2004). Beginning in the 1980s, IHEs saw a revolution of change from many acting stakeholders. Changing economic markets along with policy and legislative shifts impacted the management of IHEs. New discoveries by

faculty and students facilitated the need for policy and revenue management for patents, copyrights, and trademarks. Additionally, a shift in educational thinking saw each individual college department as a profit/loss center for the university. These new profit/loss departments were led by administrators, trustees, and presidents who set direction for the organization with economics in mind. As higher education revenue declined from 1980 to the early 2000s, the university treated students as consumers instead of learners.

The advent of the market-driven college consumer student changed how IHEs recruit tuition-paying students. Students and parents expect to see marketing messages that highlight the students' journey to self-discovery instead of marketing messages that promoted the greater good of the public. Based on these observations from Slaughter and Rhoades, the admission stakeholders are often confused about what messages they should communicate.

Newfield (2016) added a critical voice to the discussion on the commercializing mechanism of IHEs in his book *The Great Mistake* where examined how privatization which means, "replacing public with private partners, purposes and interests," has created a devolutionary cycle in higher education (Location No. 160). He argued the privatizing of public colleges impaired student learning while feeding the college cost disease. The combination of privatization efforts working together created the declining cycle of higher education, and he offered a cure for this cost disease in the form of undoing some key economic and cultural assumptions (Location No. 387).

Per Newfield, the devolutionary cycle began when universities retreated from public good in the 1980s when US economic dominance began to slip. Many think-tanks and policy makers advocated for higher tuition rates. They argued that higher tuition would result in better quality which they justified by creating a culture where education was viewed as an individuals'

private investment in their futures (2016). With this change in US ideology, public universities stopped thinking of themselves as a watch guard of public good, and began to examine those university activities that brought the best return on investment, which created an environment of outside subsidized sponsorship. These new sponsorships increased costs, facilities, and administrative positions resulting tragically in more financial problems for the university. With greater pressure to balance budgets, IHEs raised tuition two to four times faster than overall inflation (2016).

This long-term willingness to increase tuition taught legislatures that it was acceptable to cut public funds because the lost revenue could be replaced by college tuition and private donor sources. These ideologies shifted the burden of tuition to students who in turn applied for more student loans. Student loan application rates sky rocketed 45 percent per student between 2003 and 2012 (2016). As financial problems continued to occur at the university, a new possible solution was for universities to leverage private vendors to provide education. Many universities signed partnerships with online and MOOC companies to reduce costs, but the ultimate result was a decrease in the quality of education provided to students. As the quality of the education instruction and support declined, other critical measurements of education declined. The US saw declines in degree retention and attainment because students were no longer receiving the support and instruction they need to be successful in college. As retention and attainment rates decreased, the collective economic future for productivity decreased. Newfield (2016) disagreed with these trends toward privatizing higher education, and he called for a demolishing of private good supremacism. In his research, he called for a return to higher education as a, “public goods depend[ing] on public funding to have their desired impact, which is broad, even universal availability” (Location No. 1213).

To return higher education to a state of public good, Newfield offered an eight-stage recovery process and framework to reconstruct the public university. The first stages were to recognize the university as a public good reducing or ending the relationships with subsidies or partners. The next steps in the process called for a public funding to cap and reduce tuition to zero, which abolished student loan debt. This process would allow universities to focus on core education functions and broadens equity to all learners from different races and classes, which results in creative learning that opens the pathway to increase productivity and wages (Newfield, 2016, Location No. 5485).

Newfield (2016) and Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) argued the public good knowledge regime was dead and the new context for higher education was an academic privatization that has permanently redesigned how education was viewed as maximizing economic returns and maximizing self as human capital. However, Mendoza (2012), discussed a hybrid structure where the public good and private good capitalist learning regimes co-existed. Mendoza studied the effects of industry on a department's research, academic freedom vs. intellectual property, and education when he interviewed 33 participants ranging from faculty, students, administration and industry representatives. Mendoza used observational research, attended classes, held focus groups, and visited the site continually.

The major findings from Mendoza's research were that concerns for a dying public good were overstated by Slaughter and Rhoades. Mendoza (2012) showed a case study where the key term was relationship. Slaughters and Rhoades argued that the actors were vying for personal agendas that would erode public good, but Mendoza showed in his case study that the exchange of money, knowledge, intellectual property, and opportunity created a tighter co-existence relationship that benefited both parties and elevated the knowledge and opportunities for faculty,

students, and industry partners. Another area where Mendoza found differing results was at the college department level. While Mendoza (2012) agreed that departments can make money from industry and corporations. He observed the profit from industry was then returned to the school to education more students, create better research labs, fund student research projects, and ensure students had the technology and capital they needed to be prepared for future careers. He found the relationship to be mutually beneficial for both parties. So should the admission stakeholders communicate a public, private or hybrid message?

The Mendoza study viewed the marketing as overall a very positive environment because the students were taught the latest policies in industry. Students were exposed to the real world with technology, deadlines, and networks that would have been unavailable in the public good knowledge regime. One professor said:

I think the most positive aspect of industrial sponsorship is that you have the opportunity to hook the students up with the people from the company, have them tour the lab, meet with them, see how these people think, see how this particular company culture is . . . and the students get a very quick and clear insight as to whether this is really for them.

(Mendoza, 2012, p. 43)

Slaughter and Rhoads (2004) made a point that the marketing activities created a “site of consumption of various, largely nonacademic services . . . which involved a shift in patterns of institutions expenditures, with trade-offs in terms of opportunity costs and commitment to education” (p. 302). Mendoza took an alternative viewpoint that the increase industry exposure created a richer learning experience for students because the students saw the real world picture. Who should the admission office and the director of marketing follow? Should they promote public good, private good, or a hybrid version of this on the college admission webpage?

Lambert (2015) in his research agreed with Mendoza and advocated for a public-private partnership where IHEs thrived using a mutually beneficial model of privatization. Lambert argued that in some new world order distinctions must be made about funding and mission. He said, “Changes to the financial model need not change the mission of public higher education” (p.7). To explore the relationship of the whether IHEs were operating as public or private entities, Lambert interviewed nearly 150 state legislators, governors, and members of congress from both political parties. He reported the results of his interviews. He found that the issues facing IHEs like tuition control, governance, regulatory flexibility, performance assessment, and vouchers were too complex to be solved by the public stakeholders alone (2015). After interviewing these stakeholders, Lambert examined three IHEs case studies to understand how privatization was successful when the administration of the IHEs managed with an eye toward public-policy objectives and clarity regarding an institutions specific responsibilities for the public good (2015). The research from Lambert suggests that the most effective messaging may be a hybrid style with both the public and private good on the webpage.

Lambert (2015) called this relationship the new public-private model where “universities and states sought to balance institutional aspirations with important public-policy objectives as they work toward the public-private model” (p. 12). To achieve this new mutually beneficial status each party needs to work together and compromise in the following ways: Governments will need to provide stable funding; students and parents will need to pay higher tuition; faculty and staff will need to work more efficiently; and alumni, corporations and foundations will need to increase philanthropy efforts (2015). With the changing mission of IHEs from public to private to something in-between, college administrators and admission stakeholders are unsure what marketing messages should be communicated to prospective students. The goal for the

office of admission is to provide the most persuasive messaging on the college-admission website to encourage students to apply to the IHEs. However, admission stakeholders are not sure what persuasive and appropriate marketing messages should appear on the college-admission website.

IHEs Marketing and Webpages

Admission stakeholders understood the importance of the college-admission webpage. Researchers agreed the website was a valuable tool for college recruitment and a necessary part of the college acceptance cultural tradition (Zhang & O'Halloran, 2013). However, there were some disagreements as to what information and marketing messages should be provided on the webpage. The Noel-Levitz (2013) report suggested the webpages were being used for marketing purposes to students, while others noted that the webpages should be used to promote the public good and knowledge capitalism of the university instead of the social aspects of college (Saichaie & Morpew, 2014). Below, I present an examination of key studies that proved the value of the website.

College website value.

Saichaie and Morpew (2014) study college websites and they found, "college and university websites are a primary means by which prospective students learn about institutions of higher education (IHEs) and are essential to these organizations' marketing practices" (p.500). McAllister-Spooner (2010) concurred with other researchers that the college website played a strategic and tactical part in recruiting students. They discovered that when students selected a college, the website ranked as the second most influential researching tool after the campus visit (2010). In the *2013 Marketing and Student Recruitment Practices Benchmark Report*, the authors listed the top 10 most effective strategies and tactics for recruiting students. For two-year public

institutions, the college website ranked the most effective method for recruiting students. For four-year private and four-year public institutions, the college website ranked as the third most effective method, after the campus open house and the campus visit, for recruiting students (Noel-Levitz, 2013). The scholars definitively agreed that the college website was a key tool to creating leads and prospects for IHEs. However, the researchers disagreed on what information and messages should appear on the website to persuade and market to students.

College webpage messaging.

My review of the literature exposed stakeholders' confusion about consistency in marketing messages on the college-admission webpage. Five different researchers exposed the confusion about webpage content. First, Zhang and O'Halloran (2013) identified the increased organization of websites into different market segments with different student consumer experiences and messaging. With many different audiences visiting the webpage, Zhang and O'Halloran, researched what information students were seeking on the webpages. They found students visited the webpage not only to learn about programs and classes, but also to know about the experience of being a student. Zhang and O'Halloran also reported that websites portrayed the university experience, lifestyle, and personal transformation journey more than other public good messages. Zhang and O'Halloran (2013) researched the current trend for college websites to act not just as brochures, but as showcases of the university experience, lifestyle, and personal transformational journey.

Another researcher highlighted how the website has become a personalized micro-site that is highly targeted to students (Mount St. Mary's University Personalizes Student Recruitment, 2014). Students on the Mount St. Mary website select boxes that are interesting to

the student. Then the university sends the student a personalized brochure based on their individual preferences.

In another study, St. Sauver (2003) evaluated 172 university websites and found 78.4% of the websites used audience segmentation to provide relevant information to prospective audiences of students, parents, faculty, staff, and donors. The marketing messaging varied for each target market.

In another experiment, McAllister-Spooner (2010) surveyed 86 high school students, 96 parents/guardians, and 69 high-school guidance counselors in their research on college websites. They found “the availability of useful academic and admissions content is the most crucial parameter influencing perceptions of college websites” (p. 9). In contrast, The Noel-Levitz (2013) report suggested the websites were being used for marketing purposes to students

Admission stakeholders were yet again confused when looking at the research from Saichaie and Morphew (2014) who discussed how some at the state policy level were calling for the websites to have messages of an informational manner, minimizing promotional and student-centered discussions. Saichaie and Morphew (2014) evaluated the content of the website using six common content themes, which include the following: academics, campus aesthetics, fine arts, athletics, student life, and value. While the sources agreed that the webpage was an essential part of recruiting and communicating with students, researchers debated whether the content on the webpages should be strictly marketing, more about private good and the student journey, or more about the public good emphasizing knowledge and programs.

The researchers report conflicting marketing messages on the college-admission webpages. Admission stakeholders need empirical strategic and tactical recommendations on the best and most effective way to recruit students.

College website accessibility messages.

Another layer of complexity emerged when IHEs used the college-admission webpages to increase accessibility to minority populations. Wilson and Meyer (2009) examined 40 college websites from the viewpoint of prospective minority students. They evaluated the accessibility of services to minorities on the website and concluded that colleges have ample room for improvement. The researchers qualitatively evaluated websites using three criteria for minority student accessibility. The researchers found 33% of college websites were not compliant on any level of the accessibility (2009). Only 8% of college websites were compliant on all three levels of compliance accessibility. The researchers concluded that colleges were using a “don’t ask, don’t tell” approach when they designed websites because of internal pressures to create more marketing-friendly websites (2009).

This literature review discussed two important issues for higher education marketing. First I reviewed literature that discussed the “Changing Mission of IHEs” from public good to private good to something in between and how this impacts the marketing messages from admission stakeholders. Next I reviewed literature that discussed “IHEs Marketing and Webpages.” Examining the current literature on higher education marketing and college websites reaffirm the importance of the college website as a channel for informing and recruiting students and their parents to apply to colleges. Universities allot human and fiscal resources to create and maintain dynamic webpages with many different designs, styles, and marketing messaging. The academic privatization discussion brings another level of complexity to the discussion because research showed the tension that IHEs face when recruiting students (Newfield, 2016; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Some IHEs use websites for public-good messaging while others use the college website for private-good messaging (Saichaie & Morpew, 2014). There is a gap in the

literature gap because no specific studies the examined college-admission webpages specifically to determine if the messaging is public, private, or quasi-public-private messaging to students. More research is needed to facilitate a deeper understanding of the current practices of college-admission webpages for the admission stakeholders.

Methodology

A qualitative media analysis (QMA) using NVivo 11 content analysis software was selected for the study. The purpose of the research was to determine how the marketing messages on college-admission webpages reflected the public-good or private-good messages surrounding IHEs. The purpose of the research was to understand the symbolism and meaning of the words and images used to recruit students. Altheide and Schneider (2013) described the theoretical and methodological approach to QMA. They explained that “the social interaction surrounding the document in question, must be understood to grasp the significance of the document itself, even independently of the content of the document” (p. 14). Understanding the social culture of college as a public good or private good influences how the documents were created and marketed to future students. The QMA research method suited this study because the research questions examined how the words and images on the college-admission webpages communicated to an intact cultural group of future students by collecting and tracking primary observations of patterns, words, and themes (Creswell, 2014).

Procedures

The QMA methodology provided a systematic procedure for locating, identifying, retrieving, and analyzing webpages for their impact in terms of relevance and meaning for different groups and cultures (Altheide, 1987, 1996). In following the QMA basic steps, the process began with perusing a specific problem of how IHEs market to first-year college students

on college-admission webpages (Saldana, 2015). Then, I created a coding form and protocol where certain words and images were dichotomously coded as public, private or hybrid-good messages. The coding form evaluated 15 items on the college-admission webpage. For example, I copied the words on the cover photo slider of the webpage. On the University of Arizona webpage, the words were “Arizona Experience: An All-day event created for you, by you multiple dates available.” This text was recorded, collected, and coded as private-good because the meaning of the text was more oriented on a business transaction of selling and purchasing a service for the student to journey to discovering self. In contrast, on the Utah State University college-admission webpage the words that appeared on the cover photo were “Admissions Office,” without any specific call-to-action or communication directly to the students. The words simply stated the university department that handles admissions. The text on the cover photo for Utah State University were coded as a public good. To compare, the words on the University of Idaho cover photo were “Live Where the Action Is.” These words were coded as private good because it implies communication about where the student will live and experience college. (See Appendix A and B for protocol and coding information).

To help me collect the data from the webpages, I trained my graduate assistant on the coding protocol during a 2-hour training session. I had two sets of data—one collected by myself and one collected by my graduate assistant. I reviewed the collected data for accuracy and answered any questions my graduate assistant encountered during the data-collection processes. After the data were collected, I compared the data for accuracy and consistency. Then, I recognized consistent words and images and coded them for public or private good using the content analysis software NVivo 11. Using consistent words and images, I attempted to look for

themes to understand if the marketing messages that appeared on college-admission webpages were of a public, private or mixed-good nature (2015).

Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2008) described the steps for QMA. They said, “QMA is oriented to combining several steps in investigation with an explorer’s eye to pursue concepts, data, and other information sources that emerge in the context of the thinking and discovering process of the research” (p. 127). Analyzing the college-admission webpages required me to act as the instrument, immersing myself in the websites and asking key questions about how marketization influences the IHEs’ webpages. This process required examining the content to identify those marketing messages that influenced the students. I explored the relationship among marketization, IHEs’ recruiting methods, and meaning of the content. I reflected on how those factors communicated a message of public, public, or hybrid good (2008). Unlike other types of content analysis, QMA required me to be immersed in the subject matter. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2008) said, “QMA is very interactive and requires extensive familiarity with the research topic, as well as a solid grounding in the character and organization of the documents under study” (p. 136). As a professor who specializes in digital marketing and who oversees an academic degree and program development at a large public university, I have an extensive familiarity with digital marketing and college recruitment.

The specific units of analysis on the freshman college-admission webpages that were analyzed in the data collection phase included the following: the slider/cover photo, text on the cover photo, the main navigation tabs, the body copy on the page, messages about tuition, messages about the college town, and finally, the call to action for the student to apply (See Appendix A QMA College-Admission Webpage Research Protocol). The protocol was tested on several webpages not included in the sample unit. The final step in the research protocol was to

analyze and collect data from the sample populations. The data were collected in an Excel spreadsheet in preparation for uploading into the NVivo 11 software for further comparison and analysis for future “tracking discourse” and software analysis (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008, p. 130).

After the units of analysis were recorded, the units were categorized using a dichotomous coding procedure in the software NVivo 11 (Insch & Moore, 1997). For example, an image that showed students having fun in a group, traveling on a study abroad, participating in an outdoor adventure, or hiking in the mountains were coded as private-good marketing messages because the words and images showed the students in a state of learning about self-discovery. In contrast, a photo showing an academic building, faculty research, or career opportunities was coded as public-good marketing messages. Visual images, student testimonials, and landing-page text from the website were coded according to the dimensions and hierarchy of the coding framework. I created a coding framework with definitions for how to interpret images, testimonials, and text (See Appendix D: QMA Interpretation Coding Protocols). After inferring the meaning of the visual images, testimonials, and website words, I classified the material into public good, private good, or mixed public/private. I looked for symbolism in the messaging and themes. The data were collected from December 15, 2016 to January 15, 2017.

Sampling

I used a purposive sample that was non-representative of the larger population for the QMA study. Table 1 lists the eleven public, land-grant universities in the Mountain and Pacific time zones in the Western United States that were included in the sample (see Table 1).

Table 1. Eleven Land-Grant URLs and Clicks from College Website

IHEs	URL	Clicks from Homepage
University of Arizona	http://admissions.arizona.edu/	2
University of California/Berkeley	http://www.berkeley.edu/admissions	2
Oregon State University	http://oregonstate.edu/admissions/	2
Washington State University	https://wsu.edu/admission/	2
University of Nevada	https://www.unr.edu/admissions	1
Colorado State University	http://admissions.colostate.edu/	1
Utah State University	https://www.usu.edu/admissions/	2
New Mexico State University	https://www.nmsu.edu/admissions.html	1
Montana State University	http://www.montana.edu/admissions/	2
University of Wyoming	http://www.uwyo.edu/admissions/	1
University of Idaho	https://www.uidaho.edu/admissions	1

In 1862 President Lincoln passed the Morrill Act which gave states 30,000 acres of public land per senator and representative to manage as the state saw fit. The proceeds from the land were used to establish school endowments (Perkin, 2007). Some states created new universities while other states used the proceeds to enhance existing schools. For example, Brown, Cornell, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology existed as private institutions who in exchange for meeting certain standards in the field of agriculture and mechanical arts were given proceeds from the school endowment. Many states used the school endowment proceeds to create public

funded institutions. These eleven western land-grant universities were established between 1868 to 1889 from the proceeds of these school endowments and function as public institutions.

The Morrill Act put in place a system of supporting the development of land-grant universities. Some of these new universities adopted new curriculum that provided quality technical education to many students. The system facilitated a shift in education curriculum from classical studies to a more applied curriculum to meet the utilitarian, societal needs, particularly the agriculture and mechanical needs of the states (Perkin, 2007). These colleges began as poorly financed colleges known as the “1862s” and were later provided annual appropriations from the national government after the second Morrill Act passed in 1890 (National Research Council, 1995).

The original missions of these eleven land-grant colleges were to increase education opportunities to the students in their geographic areas and the curriculum taught at these schools was focused on agriculture and mechanics. The current mission statements of the eleven public, land-grant universities continue to focus on providing quality education to the people in their regions and states (See Table 2 to compare similarities of the eleven public, land-grant universities’ mission statements). By comparing the mission statements of these eleven public, land-grant universities you will see a similar mission to provide and serve the economic development in their states.

Table 2. Eleven Land-Grant Mission Statements

IHEs	Mission Statements 2017
University of Arizona	To improve the prospects and enrich the lives of the people of Arizona and the world through education, research, creative expression, and community and business partnerships.

University of California/Berkeley	<p>The University of California was founded in 1868, born out of a vision in the State Constitution of a university that would “contribute even more than California’s gold to the glory and happiness of advancing generations.”</p>
Oregon State University	<p>As a land grant institution committed to teaching, research and outreach and engagement, Oregon State University promotes economic, social, cultural and environmental progress for the people of Oregon, the nation and the world.</p>
Washington State University	<p>Washington State University will be one of the nation’s leading land-grant universities, preeminent in research and discovery, teaching, and engagement.</p>
University of Nevada	<p>Inspired by its land-grant foundation, the University of Nevada, Reno provides outstanding learning, discovery, and engagement programs that serve the economic, social, environmental, and cultural needs of the citizens of Nevada, the nation, and the world. The University recognizes and embraces the critical importance of diversity in preparing students for global citizenship and is committed to a culture of excellence, inclusion, and accessibility.</p>
Colorado State University	<p>Inspired by its land-grant heritage, Colorado State University is committed to excellence, setting the standard for public research universities in teaching, research, service and extension for the benefit of the citizens of Colorado, the United States and the world.</p>
Utah State University	<p>The mission of Utah State University is to be one of the nation’s premier student-centered land-grant and space-grant universities by fostering the principle that academics come first, by cultivating diversity of thought and culture, and by serving the public through learning, discovery, and engagement.</p>
New Mexico State University	<p>NMSU Grants provides an accessible quality education through innovative teaching and learning that promotes respect and service for our diverse students and community.</p>
Montana State University	<p>Montana State University, the state’s land-grant institution, educates students, creates knowledge and art, and serves communities by integrating learning, discovery and engagement.</p>

University of Wyoming	The University of Wyoming aspires to be one of the nation's finest public land-grant research universities. We serve as a statewide resource for accessible and affordable higher education of the highest quality; rigorous scholarship; technology transfer; economic and community development; and responsible stewardship of our cultural, historical, and natural resources.
University of Idaho	The University of Idaho College of Natural Resources is committed to disciplinary and interdisciplinary programs that integrate ecological, social and natural resource science and management systems. Our research, education and outreach sustains people and the land through innovative science, technology and leadership.

Not all land-grant colleges were public colleges and some colleges changed their land-grant status over time (Perkin, 2007). The eleven land-grant IHEs in the sample have maintained their land-grant public status. This homogenous land-grant sample was chosen because these universities have a similar history, geography, and public funding source. While the sample shares some similarities, the IHEs in the sample vary per their basic Carnegie Classification. The Carnegie Classification system is a framework used in the United States to organize IHEs. The Basic Classification categorizes schools by the type of degrees granted and the measurable amount of research activity. The highest level of Basic Classification is called "R1: Doctoral Universities – Highest Research Activity;" the next level is called "R2: Doctoral Universities – Higher Research Activity;" the last level is called "R3: Doctoral Universities – Modest Research Activity;" ("The Carnegie Classification," n.d.). All of the IHEs in the sample are Doctoral with either R1 or R2 classification. Table 3 shows the similarities within the sample. Additionally, these eleven land-grant universities target a similar type of freshman student. This student, in most cases, was looking for a university experience that offered value for his or her education, while being geographically close to home.

Table 3. Eleven Land-Grant Universities Sample

Note: The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education TM. (n.d.). Retrieved April 18, 2017, from <http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/>

IHEs	Carnegie Classification	Time Zone	Pop.	Year Founded
Univ. of Arizona	R1	PST	42,236	1885
Univ. of California/Berkeley	R1	PST	37,565	1868
Oregon State Univ.	R1	PST	28,886	1868
Washington State Univ.	R1	PST	28,686	1890
Univ. of Nevada	R2	PST	28,515	1874
Colorado State Univ.	R1	MST	31,354	1870
Utah State Univ.	R2	MST	27,662	1888
New Mexico State Univ.	R2	MST	15,829	1888
Montana State Univ.	R2	MST	14,982	1893
Univ. of Wyoming	R2	MST	12,820	1886
Univ. of Idaho	R2	MST	11,702	1889

Instruments

Effective and efficient data collection for QMA research requires careful planning and strong time-management skills. Creswell wrote, “Qualitative researchers collect data themselves through examining documents, observing behavior, or interviewing participants” (p. 185). To accurately collect the data, I studied the background information prior to writing the research

protocols. Factual and other easily accessed information were collected prior to the research study. Altheide and Schneider (2013) stated:

Qualitative document data are very individualistic in the sense that the main investigator is “involved” with the concepts, relevance, development of the protocol, and internal logic of the categories, or the way in which the items have been collected for the purposes of later analysis. (p. 62)

I followed the protocol and inductively and deductively evaluated the college-admission webpages for consistent themes and deductively reflected on the research process allowing for changes in the design of the study. I attempted to implant myself in the research to accurately reflect the meaning of websites on prospective students. I acknowledged how my involvement in the recruiting process influenced the research and shaped the study.

Reliability/Validity

I followed the reliability and validity protocols for content analysis outlined by Krippendorff (2012). He explained that three types of reliability exist for content analysis: stability, reproducibility, and accuracy. Stability referred to the degree to which the measuring process produced the same results after repeated trials. Reproducibility was defined as the ability for the process to be repeated under varying conditions. Finally, to ensure reliability, the study was accurate, which meant the process conformed to its specifications and yielded what it was designed to yield (2012). Based on the recommendations of Krippendorff (2012), the QMA research process included the following steps: First, all data were collected using a formulated, clear, step-by-step process that could be easily followed by others. Next, the data were checked to ensure accuracy of collection, and mistakes were corrected throughout the collection and coding process; third, the data were collected and constantly compared to the protocols and

codes to provide and prevent a shift in the code; finally, a research assistant and I cross-checked the data and codes and ensured intercoder agreement 80% of the time as recommended by Creswell (2014). By including these research strategies in the methodology, the data from the study met reasonable reliability standards according to Krippendorff (2012).

According to Krippendorff (2012) qualitative validity occurred when the researcher measured what the researcher claimed to be measuring. To ensure validity in the research, I used three validity strategies in the research design. To ensure trustworthiness in the design, I used rich, thick descriptions to convey the findings (Creswell, 2014). Creswell explained rich, thick descriptions. He explained, “When qualitative researchers provide detailed descriptions of the setting, for example, or offer many perspectives about a theme, the results become realistic and richer” (p. 202). The QMA methodology was designed to collect the words and images that appeared on the college-admission webpages in an effort to transport the reader to the website, which created a shared experience for the readers. The second validity strategy was to clarify the bias of the researcher. Stake (1995) and Yin (2009) explained that the qualitative study method used the constructivist theory that truth was relative and dependent on one’s perspective. I clarified my bias on the topic of student recruitment and marketing messages, which created an open and honest narrative that built a level trust and credibility with the reader (Creswell, 2014).

Data Analysis

In addition to traditional content analysis, which focused on word count and frequencies, I also searched for meaningful patterns, symbols, and messages that appeared in the context of the words and images. Altheide and Schneider explained the difference between traditional content analysis and QMA. They said, “The goal [of QMA] is to understand the process, to see the types and meanings of the document under investigation, and to be able to associate the

documents with conceptual and theoretical issues” (2013, p. 70). I examined the words and images for possible public, private, or mixed-good meanings. The analysis of the data occurred as I interacted with the college-admission webpages (2013).

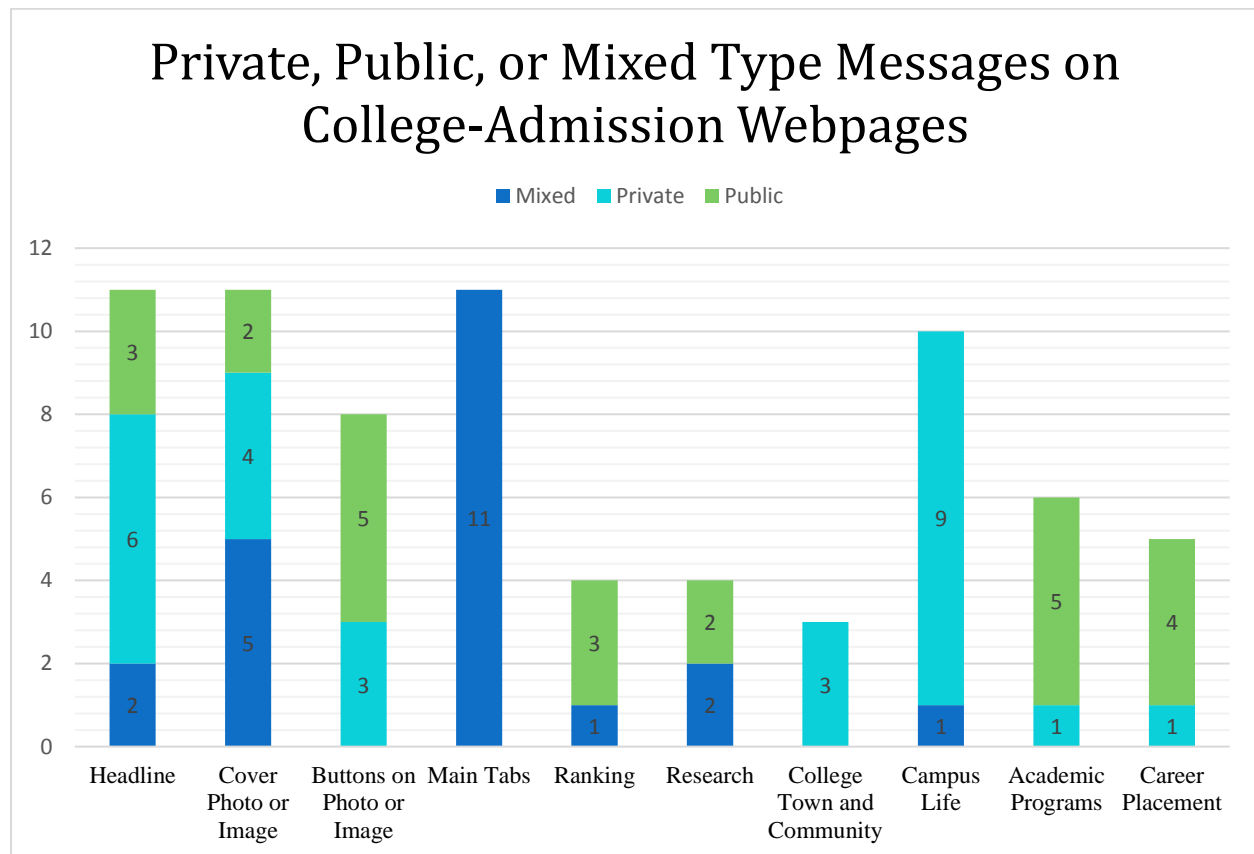
Following the QMA methodology, I compared and contrasted extremes or key differences (Altheide & Schneider, 2013), writing brief summaries and overviews of data for each category. The next step involved reading, sorting, and searching through the websites while comparing the categories of communication to students. I compared the words and meanings of the different categories, including: headlines, slider images, buttons, tabs, quotes, testimonials, campus life, and rankings. After the data were decoded for meaning and organized into categories, I analyzed the results.

Results

The coding protocol evaluated 15 different elements on the website. Each website element was dichotomously coded as private, public, or mixed message. A total of 73 items were coded with 24 items coded as public good, 27 items being coded as private good, and 22 items being coded as a mix of both private and public good. The most predominately displayed elements on the webpage included the “headline” and the “cover photo.” Approximately 54.5% of the headlines on the college-admission websites communicated a private-good message with 27.27% reporting a public-good message and 18.18% reporting a mixed public/private good message. When comparing the images first observed on the webpage, 36.36% were coded as private, with 18.18% coded as public and 45.45% coded as mixed public/private messages. The two largest coded elements for private goods were the elements of “college town/community” and “campus life.” The two largest coded elements for public good were “academic programs”

and information about “college rankings.” Figure 1 shows each website element and the proportion of messaging that was coded as private good, public good, or mixed.

Figure 1. Private, Public and Mixed Messages on College-Admission Webpages by Webpage Element



The “main tab” elements displayed across the top of the webpage had the highest number of mixed messages with all 11 webpages being coded as mixed. The “campus life” element existed on ten of the samples webpages and nine of the messages were coded as private good with one message being coded as public. The University of California at Berkeley was coded as public because the text that appeared in the “campus life” life element led students to a video titled

“What does it mean to Be Berkeley” (University of California Berkeley, 2017). The video talked about the responsibility of students to live up to the Berkeley name.

The “academic programs” element appeared on six of the webpages. The text for the “academic programs” element was coded public except for the webpage from Oregon State University. Where other webpages listed the number of majors and programs, the Oregon State University webpage text said, “Find Your Counselor – Our counselors are ready to meet you and make it easy to become a Beaver” (Oregon State University, 2017). Other webpage elements can be examined in the Figure 1.

Frequency

While the frequency of messages by raw numbers shows a balance of private and public messages—24 items coded public good, 27 items coded private good, and 22 items coded a mix of private and public good—a more in depth qualitative media analysis of the messaging showed private messages were more dominantly communicated to students.

One area of confusing data was the main navigation tabs across the top of the webpages. All webpages had navigation “tabs” coded as mixed messages. However, when looking at the navigation “tabs” webpages through a qualitative lens, I noticed the three consistent tabs on the webpages were the following: “Apply,” “Campus Tour,” and “Student Life.” In contrast, only five of the webpages had a top navigation “tab” for academics and only three of the webpages had a top navigation “tab” for research.

Not only were the messages coded, but I also examined the word count on the webpages. Table 4 shows the top 20 most frequent words by count and weighted percentage. These numbers include words that are similar. For example, the word “student” and its similar word forms “students” appeared 24 times on the webpages and had the highest percentage word count with a

3.54% frequency. The next two most frequent words were “campus” with 2.65% frequency and “apply” with 2.03% frequency. These three words were all private in nature because they talked about the student journey. In contrast, publicly coded words like “research” appeared with 1.55% frequency; “academics” appeared with 1.18% frequency; “major” appeared with .74% frequency; “institution” appeared with a .29% frequency. Words like “faculty” failed to appear on the webpages and had no word count frequency. The highest-ranking frequency for public coded word was “university” with a 1.84%.

Table 4. College-Admission Webpage Top 20 Word Count and Weighted Percentage

Word	Code	Count	Weighted Percentage
Student	private	24	3.54
Campus	private	18	2.65
Apply	private	17	2.03
University	public	14	1.84
Admissions	public	11	1.62
Research	public	12	1.55
Visit	private	10	1.47
Academics	public	8	1.18
learn	public	11	1.18
shows	n/a	13	1.14
state	public	9	1.06
building	public	8	1.03
graduate	public	7	1.03
schools	public	8	1.03
colleges	public	6	0.88
photo	private	9	0.88
video	private	9	0.88
background	n/a	5	0.74
begin	n/a	5	0.74
different	n/a	5	0.74

Figure 2 shows a word cloud that graphically displays the most frequently used words on the college-admission webpages.

Figure 2. College-Admission Word Cloud Frequencies

The literature affirmed the value of the college-admission website to serve as the face of the university for recruiting prospective students; however, the literature showed that inconsistent messages appeared on the webpages. The research questions asked what type of public and private marketing messages appeared on the college-admission webpages and how often with what frequency. The following discussion synthesizes the connections between the admission stakeholders at land-grant universities and the public and private-good marketing messages.

Public Good Themes.

Many land-grant colleges and universities were created with the purpose to increase education accessibility and affordability to people in their states. These land-grant IHEs are seen as the model of organizations who protect the public good of education in society. I expected the marketing messaging on these websites to reflect this role of protecting the public good by communicating the value of education, research, knowledge and learning. Overall, public-good themes appeared less often and in less desirable locations on the college-admission webpages. The college-admission webpages had public-good marketing messages when discussing the elements of research, rankings, academic programs, and career placement; however, these elements were not consistently displayed on all the webpages and the real-estate location on the webpages for these elements was less desirable. For example, when discussing research, only four of the eleven in the sample mentioned research on the webpage. Washington State University has a text paragraph about “research” half way down the webpage. The message on the webpage states, “We are a top-ranked research institution immersed in new discoveries and solutions that make the world a better place” (Washington State University, 2017). The message appeared in a light grey font with no photo or credible source to support the claim. While this

public messaging appeared, it failed to make an impactful impression on the prospective college student.

When evaluating the “ranking” element, only four of eleven of the webpages displayed ranking messages. The “academic programs” element was the most public-good-coded element with six of the eleven webpages displaying messaging about college degrees or programs. However, the messaging was usually short and only listed the quantity of major and programs. If the purpose of these land-grant universities is to increase accessibility of learning to students, I would expect to see more focus on academic programs and colleges. For example, the University of Arizona message was “More than 100 Majors” (University of Arizona, 2017). The University of Idaho was similar. The messaging said, “Majors: 85 undergraduate, 62 Master’s, 31 Doctoral” (University of Idaho, 2017). However, the messaging was not specific about the types of degrees and did not attempt to make the learning look exciting and fun.

When looking at the “career placement” element only four IHEs had messages about career placement and one school communicated the message as a private good. As a land-grant university, whose mission is to educate students to contribute back to society through exciting careers, the webpages lacked any marketing messages that communicated this message. The University of Arizona’s webpage stated, “Beyond employment, are you looking to design your ideal career and life?” (University of Arizona, 2017). While the element was about employment, it was coded as private because the meaning of the message was more about “your ideal career and life” not about helping to build society through challenging careers. The marketing messaging could have discussed how great the student will feel when they work in a career that helps others.

The lack and frequency of quality public-good themes that appeared on the webpages reflected what Newfield (2016) criticized—that IHEs are in a devolutionary cycle where IHEs promote individual prestige over the good of the public. The land-grant universities need to change the marketing messaging that fun and adventure is learning hard things and giving back to society.

Private Good Themes.

Students are naturally self-interested, and they are looking for experiences that are fun and adventurous. With a lack of resources and training many admission stakeholders have chosen to market the private good over the public good. The private-good messages were predominately displayed and the text and images were more richly enhanced with appealing images, fonts and colors. The first item a prospective student saw on a webpage was the “cover photo” and “headline.” All eleven webpages had these elements. Four “cover photos” had private-good images only and another six had mixed-message images. Furthermore, when examining the images qualitatively, the researcher noticed that even in the mixed-message images, the message of public good were significantly downplayed. For example, the University of Nevada’s cover photo image—which was coded as a mixed message—displayed three students wearing backpacks with a campus building in the background. The campus building appeared in one-eighth of the photos. The campus building was an old Victorian building with the image of the side wall displayed. In front of the building was an image of three additional students laughing and looking happy. These two images are not the central focus of the image. The central focus of the images are three additional students with sunglasses, hats, and happy faces.

The “campus life” element was the most consistently displayed element after the “cover photos” and “headlines.” Ten of the eleven webpages prominently displayed images or text of “campus life” and all ten of the occurrences were coded private good. For example, Montana State University’s cover photo was a graphic design of mountains with the headline “Big ideas and bold adventures – Bozeman, Montana” (Montana State University, 2017). Also, the apply button on the website states “Apply Your MSU adventure starts here” (2017). The messaging of the images and the apply button suggested a private good of self-discovery through adventure.

Montana State was not the only school that communicated a private-good adventure message. Colorado State University also displayed the private-good message with greater emphasis than the public good or mixed messages. The initial images on the Colorado State University page were a slider showing the following three images: the outdoors with a male student overlooking a lake, a boxwood plant, and what appeared to be a wide-angle photo of the campus buildings. The photo of the campus building was displayed last, suggesting this images was the least important.

Obviously, the admission stakeholders want to display the college experience as fun and adventurous. Yes, they want to attract students and they want the students to be excited and happy about their college experience. However, the role of the land-grant institutions is to increase accessibility to education and to provide an educated workforce that can contribute to society. The admission stakeholders have an opportunity to reposition the marketing message that the true journey to fun and adventure is a process of self-discovery where students learn things they never knew before, and they give back to society by working hard and serving. As a researcher and marketer, I think the admission stakeholders can do both.

Conclusions

Limitations

The limitations with the qualitative media analysis (QMA) study include purposive sampling, researcher bias, the use of external audit and changing webpage content. Barbour (2001) discussed the limitations of qualitative research and provided a realistic appraisal of their potential. One of the criticisms of qualitative research was the use of purposive sampling where researchers intentionally include outliers in the sample to highlight a specific point or conclusions. To avoid this limitation in a purposive sample, I “enhanced sample coverage and provide a framework for analysis” (2001, p. 1116) that continuously compared the college-admission webpages to highlight subtle and valuable differences.

Another limitation that arose in the QMA research design was my bias may have been present during the initial logic of discover phase. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2008) described the steps for QMA as follows: “QMA is oriented to combining several steps in investigation with an explorer’s eye to pursue concepts, data, and other information sources that emerge in the context of the thinking and discovering process of the research” (p. 127). However, in the first step of QMA, when I pursued the logic of discovery phase, I conducted a literature review and factual research that helped me formulate some type of viewpoint on the research study (Barbour, 2001). The purpose of choosing the QMA methodology was to allow me to be open to the changing meaning and design of the study. To ensure the realistic potential of the study, I needed to be working to develop existing theory or new theories (2001). The research was also limited by the external audit or, as Barbour (2001) called it, the respondent validation: “respondents may have individual concerns, and this can result in apparently discrepant accounts” (p. 1117).

Finally, webpage content changes over time, which might limit subsequent researchers from accessing and appreciating the findings. However, using software like archive.org will give readers access to the original webpages for immediate reflection and examination.

Implications

The purpose of the research was to describe what marketing messages appeared on the college-admissions webpages and whether those marketing messages communicated a public or private nature so that admission stakeholders could be more informed about how IHEs are marketing on college-admission websites. This first qualitative media analysis study will serve as the beginning of a larger study using eye-tracking technology to investigate how students perceive public or private messages on the webpages. Further research could provide recommendations for how admission stakeholders could create marketing messages that appeal to prospective students and at what frequency level those messages need to appear to make an impression on students. Additional research could also examine which of the 15 elements examined in the initial study are important to prospective students. This information could help admission stakeholders as they formulate strategic and tactical decisions concerning webpage messaging. Additional research project possibilities may study the relationship between the size of IHEs' endowment accounts and the types of messaging on the university homepage.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest exists with this research.

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Appendix A

Protocols: QMA College-Admission Webpage Data Collection Protocols

Begin a data collection session by typing in one of the provided sample IHE's URLs in the browser search bar. After the website loads, take 3-5 minutes to look at the website, becoming familiar with the navigation, images, words, tabs, and tone of the website. Try to insert yourself as a prospective freshman student looking for information and messages about the IHE. Open an Excel worksheet and collect data by typing in words and descriptions according to the protocol. An example of the what research Excel worksheet may look like please see the next page.

Step 1: Website URL:

Step 2: Date of Search on URL:

Step 3: Clicks Away from initial college website:

Step 4: Admissions Website headline:

Step 5: Photo: Yes/No – Describe photo image:

Step 6: Quote on admission webpages: Yes/No – Record quote

Step 7: Student Testimonial: Yes/No – Record testimonial

Step 8: Buttons on website: Yes/No – Record button words

Step 9: Tabs on the top or side: Yes/No – Record tab words

Step 10: School Rankings: Yes/No – Record text

Step 11: Research: Yes/No – Record text

Step 12: College Town/Surrounding Region: Yes/No – Record text

Step 13: Campus Life: Yes/No – Record text

Step 14: Academic Programs: Yes/No – Record text

Step 15: Career Placement: Yes/No – Record career placement

College-Admission Webpage Research Protocols	
Protocol Questions	Record University Data Here
Step 1: Admission Web Address	https://www.universityname.edu/admissions
Step 2: Date of Search	
Step 3: Clicks Away from website	Type in a NUMBER here
Step 4: Type in the first headline you see on the website	
Step 5: Type in a description of the picture most predominately displayed on the website (who is in the picture, where is it taken, what is in the background)	
Step 6: Type in a quote you see on the website	
Step 7: Type in a student testimonial on the website	
Step 8: Type in the buttons you see on the website	
Step 9: Type in the tabs you see on the top or sides of the screen	
Step 10: Type in any school rankings information	
Step 11: Type in information about academic research	
Step 12: Type in any information about the college town	
Step 13: Type in any information about campus life	
Step 14: Type in any information about academic programs	
Step 15: Type in any information about career placement	

Appendix B**Table 3. 10 QMA Interpretation Coding Protocols**

Possible Public-Good words	Possible Private-Good words
Academics/Course offered/Majors	Campus Life – clubs, intramurals, fraternities
Faculty Research	Experiences – outdoors recreation
Advising	Friendships
GPA/ACT/SAT	College town – restaurants, shopping,
Career Placement	Rankings
Life-time Learning	Study abroad
Minority/Underserved admission	College events (ie. Homecoming)
Tuition/Aid	Sports
Possible Public-Good Images	Possible Private-Good Images
University Buildings	Students laughing
Faculty	Students having fun
Students researching	Students participating in sports
Students in a class room	Students participating in outdoor recreation
Students taking exams	Students riding bikes
Minority students	Students playing games
Underserved populations	Conferences and symposiums