The Possibility for Harm Present When Institutions Misrepresent Student Body Diversity

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ABSTRACT: In an attempt to attract students, many institutions of higher learning are manipulating their marketing materials to make it appear as if their student populations are more diverse than they actually are. While organizations of all types often portray users of their products and services as idealized in order to appeal to a broad base or desired demographic, this rarely leads to harm. In the case of university and college students of diversity, however, such misrepresentation can lead to harm if they choose to attend an institution under the belief that they will be surrounded by peers and discover something altogether different once they arrive. Such distortion can, in turn, hurt the institution's reputation and retention and should be avoided.

KEYWORDS: higher education, diversity, misrepresentation, marketing

INTRODUCTION

University marketing efforts, focused on recruiting students, donors, and promoting the institutional image have become increasingly crucial to the operations and survival of many schools (Camelia & Marius, 2013). Institutions of all sizes have significantly increased marketing budgets, with a major emphasis on recruiting new students (Pippert et al., 2013). Universities must engage in marketing activities to both sustain their enrollment numbers and to be able to participate in the value creation activities benefiting both students and the institution. In an effort to attract students who may not otherwise consider the institution, some are exaggerating the percentage of minority students on campus in marketing materials and artifacts.

On the one hand, this could be considered a noble recruitment strategy because it allows the consumer/prospective student to put themselves in the place of these students and see themselves represented. This practice is similar to how consumers view a commercial or print advertisement and imagine themselves using the product (driving the fast car, removing stains from the dirty baseball pants, or other similar examples). But the advertising tactic of colleges and universities is more than just creating an ideal image for the consumer if the institution cannot deliver on its promise. Students influenced by these marketing materials can go to these schools expecting one thing and then receiving another. This deception is similar to a company selling a faulty product, making false claims, or engaging in bait-and-switch practices.

Given that colleges and universities feel more pressure than ever in today's environment to foster a diverse student population on their campuses (Mickey et al., 2020), it can be natural for colleges and universities to want to appeal to select students, and showing people who look like them in recruiting materials would be a natural extension of this. For the first time, the majority of children in the United States are not Caucasian but rather belong to a minority race (Frey,

2019). However, a question arises: If admissions offices are going too far in their quest to recruit minority students and to promote a diverse campus to everyone, can misrepresenting existing diversity in the student body through marketing materials and artifacts be harmful to the very students they seek to reach?

MARKETING OVERVIEW

The primary purpose of marketing, according to Sheth et al. (1988), is to create value and disseminate that value among all parties involved in a transaction. An incomplete picture of marketing is the view that the discipline is solely about generating sales, convincing others to buy, or winning in negotiations, as might be seen in a sales-oriented firm (Keith, 1960; Sheth et al., 1988). This win-lose approach overlooks the focus on providing true value to the customer for a focus on only meeting the needs of the producer, concentrating on short-term sales goals (Keith, 1960). Marketing involves a focus on creating "win-win" relationships, where everyone involved in the transaction benefits. A true application of marketing theory and principles must take into account how every firm and individual involved in a transaction will benefit (Sheth et al., 1988).

One of the primary tools for marketing used in the college admissions recruitment process is the use of print and digital viewbooks and websites filled with full-color images of life on campus (Osei-Kofi et al., 2013). It has been documented that many colleges engage in the practice of intentionally presenting a racially diverse student and faculty population through the selection of which images they use in these marketing publications and websites (Hernandez et al., 2020; Pippert et al., 2013). While demonstrating racial diversity can be a healthy goal, the practice of overrepresenting the proportion of nonwhite students in promotional materials potentially misrepresents the actual experience of diversity at the institution (Hernandez et al., 2020). It has been found that in some cases, the less racially diverse the true demographics of a school are, the more likely that school is to include highly diverse images in its marketing artifacts (Hernandez et al., 2020). Campuses that are primarily white in particular often grossly overrepresent minority students, especially African Americans, in the marketing materials used for student recruiting (Pippert et al., 2013). Because of the prevalence of this permutation, it is the one focused on in this paper, but the same inquiry could apply in any situation where a similar circumstance exists.

DEFINITIONS AND AN EXAMPLE

To put the question being examined in proper perspective, it is helpful to first define terms and then consider an example.

Harmful

The American Marketing Association (AMA) equates harmful actions with those that erode trust. Customer trust, in its truest sense, is degraded by actions that are deemed to be less than acceptable and, for that reason, the examination of harm is dependent on the understanding of acceptable.

Acceptable

At a basic level, acceptable is defined as "capable or worthy of being accepted," "barely satisfactory or adequate" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). To operationalize a definition of acceptable as it pertains to the topic at hand, the AMA's (2021) "Code of Conduct" will be examined to expand the application of the word acceptable to marketing materials used by universities. The AMA extensively discusses ethics and honesty in advertising stating that marketers should do no harm, foster trust, and embrace ethical values. They expand on these ethical values by subdividing them into honesty, responsibility, fairness, respect, and citizenship. Regarding honesty, the AMA (2021) discusses the responsibility of marketers to be truthful in every situation and to "offer products of value that do what we claim in our communications" (para. 6). The AMA's call to offer products of value that do what they say they will further builds on the issue of trust, which will be the core issue of this exploration.

For the purposes of this analysis, acceptable will be defined as being both consistent with sound marketing theories and with ethical marketing practices (American Marketing Association, 2021; Narver & Slater, 1990). For something to be acceptable, it should both help increase a college's market orientation as well as pass an ethical assessment such as those proposed by Hosmer (2011).

Institutions of Higher Learning

While colleges and universities have different characteristics, for this analysis these two terms will be used interchangeably, as they both represent higher education institutions (HEIs). Furthermore, both a college and a university have admissions offices and face the pressures of recruiting in a complex environment. Therefore, within the bounds of this examination, the two terms can be used interchangeably.

Figure 1: An Example of One University's Course Catalogs from Current and Recent Years

Diversity

Diversity can include a wide range of demographic and psychographic variables including race, gender, age, disability, and other factors (Toner, 2016). For the purposes of this consideration, diversity will focus exclusively on racial and ethnic diversity, as is consistent with other research (Comeaux et al., 2020; Osei-Kofi et al., 2013; Pippert et al., 2013).

Marketing Materials/Artifacts

This refers to the visual print, digital marketing, and promotional pieces that include an emphasis on full-color photographs developed for the purposes of institutional promotion and student recruitment (Holland & Ford, 2021; Pippert et al., 2013). Figure 1 shows an example of several course catalogs from one institution and its actual student body demographics (obtained from College Factual. com). The course catalog, and their covers, are something each student must come into contact with as they plan their schedules and can be found online as well as in printed form. In the case of this institution—and most others—the only images associated with the catalogs are on the cover and thus represent 100% of the images presented to prospective and current students. NOTE: Identifying information about the university has been purposely obscured as this is intended only to represent an example of an issue larger than a single university.

DIVERSITY ON CAMPUS

Prospective students appear to both value and desire greater diversity on college campuses. A recent study highlights that there is significant support among college and university students for racially diverse campuses (Carey et al., 2020). When exploring factors of what they value in their classmates, Carey et al. (2020) found that next to academic ability, students want to be in classes with other students from historically underrepresented groups, including racial minorities, women, and those from a lower socioeconomic status. Other studies demonstrate the strong desire of Generation Z, the current class of college students, to attend welcoming and inclusive campuses where all students, regardless of race or other identity factors, will feel safe and welcomed (Shapiro, 2019). Of note, Shapiro found that this goes beyond the campus being open and accepting of students from all backgrounds but also includes an active feeling of being welcomed and wanted. Evidence suggests that some minority students will also conduct their own research into diversity and racial attitudes on campuses before choosing which college to attend (Comeaux et al., 2020). When diversity is embraced across the campus, student perceptions of social trust and the overall university brand have been shown to increase, being viewed as factors that demonstrate a commitment to diversity and improving institutional goals (Yao et al., 2019).

Clayton (2021) accurately describes the current environment in higher education, stating,

> The recent triple crisis—the COVID-19 pandemic, the systemic racism in this country, and racial inequities in higher education—has prompted a clarion call for more effective strategies that will result in more equitable outcomes for underrepresented populations by placing DEI [diversity, equity, inclusion] at the core of our institutional practice. (para. 6)

It is critical to understand what inclusion and equity mean, as these are key concepts that college admissions offices are trying to touch on when they create recruiting materials. Inclusion focuses on the value and respect of all persons, ensuring individuals are equipped with what they need to be successful in their environment. "On a campus, inclusion means having a valued voice, seeing others like you represented around you and in the curriculum" (Clayton, 2021, para. 3). It is important to understand that seeing representative minorities in college recruiting materials is not the same as seeing those same people on campus.

Confer and Mamiseishvili (2012) explored specific diversity goals and challenges among the faith-based members of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). Their study examined the factors leading racial minorities to choose to attend a CCCU member school, a group of schools that have historically not represented high levels of diversity. Based upon 2005 statistics, while nationally 27.4% of college students are minorities, they represent only 15% of students at faith-based colleges. Of note, the study found that interaction on campus with faculty and students during campus visits had the most positive impact on minority students choosing to enroll in the CCCU school. While the full reasons behind this were beyond the scope of the study, it is important to note the impact of each of these marketing strategies.

Universities have responded to the call for increased diversity on campus, with many turning diversity into a marketing and recruitment tool as higher education has become more consumer-focused (Scarritt, 2019). Similar to the ways in which schools promote their luxurious dormitories, well-appointed fitness centers, chef-inspired campus dining halls, and championship-winning sports/entertainment options, some schools have found that promoting the diversity of their campus can lead to increased revenue

from students willing to pay for an academic experience in a diverse setting (Scarritt, 2019). This has led, at times, to unscrupulous decisions, including the choice by some colleges to digitally alter images used in promotional materials to increase the number of minority students in the photos (Clegg, 2000). Further, diversity in marketing artifacts often does not extend beyond the imagery; displaying images of a diverse campus but not referencing the diversity and inclusion efforts of the college in the text of the marketing material presents a disconnect between the visual representation of the campus and the messages in the text (Hernandez et al., 2020). Institutions need to ensure consistency in their marketing efforts in order to truly represent and achieve their commitments to a diverse student body (Hernandez et al., 2020). Furthermore, these institutions seem to face a serious challenge of retaining students once they reach campus and realize the actual diversity of the institution was misrepresented in its marketing materials.

Individuals tasked with recruiting new college students out of an ever shrinking pool of high school graduates (Nadworny, 2019) may find themselves resorting to sales-oriented tactics (as opposed to relationship-oriented strategies) in order to bring in students. Academic institutions may attempt to present an aspirational view of their campus diversity in their marketing materials, focusing more on what type of institution they desire to be versus the institution they are today (Pippert et al., 2013). Likely, this is based upon some level of market-sensing activity, which has indicated that incoming students desire diverse campus communities. But true market intelligence would indicate that students desire more than diversity. Recognizing that the current generation of students wants to feel genuinely welcomed on campus (Shapiro, 2019), misrepresenting the student body appears to be contrary to the market-oriented behavior of a true customer orientation. A minority student choosing to enroll on many college campuses will quickly realize the stark contrast between the diversity presented in the viewbook and the actual diversity on campus, thus ensuring that instead of finding the trust and honesty they sought, they realize they were sold an idea instead of a reality.

ANALYSIS

Interfunctional coordination suggests that all functions of a company, not only marketing, must be focused on providing superior value for customers, connected to the concept of organization-wide responsiveness (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Narver & Slater, 1990). On many college campuses, marketing and promotional activities are left entirely in the hands of the admissions and marketing departments, with little input

sought or desired from elsewhere in the institution.

Within this light, misrepresenting the true nature of campus life through recruiting materials is an example of short-term thinking. Leong (2014) states, "Another reason that faked diversity should trouble us is that manipulating photographs is deceptive—a way of communicating to the viewer that the institution has done the difficult work of establishing diversity when in fact it hasn't" (para. 15). There is no place for deception in acceptable advertising, whether the advertiser is a corporation or a college.

The American Marketing Association's (AMA) (2021) "Statement of Ethics" defines both ethical norms and ethical values that should guide ethical marketing behavior and direct the actions of the organization's membership. One of the listed ethical norms is to "foster trust in the marketing system" (American Marketing Association, 2021, "Ethical Norms" section). A key aspect of creating trust is avoiding deception. While the practices of misrepresenting diversity on college campuses may not contain a blatant lie, as they would if the text specifically stated false metrics of racial diversity on campus, the practice does appear to have an intent to deceive by presenting a false sense of the campus climate.

In the list of ethical values of the AMA (2021), the values of honesty, responsibility, fairness, respect, transparency, and citizenship are identified and defined. Under the definition of honesty is a commitment to being truthful with stakeholders, a commitment that is inconsistent with a misrepresentation of facts. The value of responsibility includes the statement that marketers will "recognize our special commitments to vulnerable market segments such as children, seniors, the economically impoverished, market illiterates, and others who may be substantially disadvantaged" (American Marketing Association, 2021, "Ethical Values" section). Based on their code of ethics, marketers have a responsibility to integrate and support vulnerable and disadvantaged customers (American Marketing Association, 2021). The practice of misrepresenting diversity within the student body is contrary to this value of ethical marketing.

The value of respect also includes a goal to "value individual differences and avoid stereotyping customers or depicting demographic groups (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation) in a negative or dehumanizing way" (American Marketing Association, 2021, "Ethical Values" section). At first glance it may appear that utilizing images showing diversity in the student body is respecting various demographic groups, but it has been shown that institutions tend to overemphasize photographs illustrating African American students and often underrepresent depictions of Hispanic and Native American students (Hernandez et al., 2020; Pippert et al., 2013).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Using the definition of acceptable as both consistent with marketing theory and general ethical behavior and assessing the issue through the lens of market orientation, the ethical standards of the marketing discipline, and Hosmer's (2011) ethical model, this practice is clearly not acceptable. Colleges and universities are not acting in the best interest of their stakeholders when engaging in this practice, and the long-term consequences of this lack of true market orientation may result in decreased student retention, decreased alumni giving, and poorer institutional reputation (Webster et al., 2010).

Operating in a manner that is less than acceptable can be construed as being harmful to the very population that the institutions of higher education are trying to reach. The tactic being employed when overrepresenting student body diversity is analogous to the bait-and-switch method of fraud engaged in by less than scrupulous retailers and should be avoided regardless of any pressures to increase enrollment numbers. Institutions of higher education depend upon relationships and affiliation to survive and cannot be sales-oriented if they are to endure in the long run. Such institutions should avoid misleading advertising and strive to produce marketing materials that represent reality and still appeal to their target market.

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