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Pope, N. (2021). Visual Representation of Black Students and its Effect on Enrollment at Predominantly White, Faith-Based Universities. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/mcnair-research/20>

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**Seeing Campus in Color: Visual Representation of Black Students and its Effect on
Enrollment at Predominantly White, Faith-Based Universities**

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Abstract

As higher education institutions diversify their student body, they employ tactics specifically aimed at reaching prospective students from minority groups. This study examined marketing tactics used by universities through a content analysis of photographs posted to the Instagram accounts of three faith-based universities in the United States. Photographed individuals were classified into different ethnic groups to understand how frequently members of those groups were visually represented. A Pearson Correlation using data gathered from the content analysis and each university's enrollment and retention data for Black students did not find statistical significance. Limitations of the study and future research are discussed.

Keywords: Higher education, social media, diversity, student retention

Introduction

Colleges and universities all over the United States want to increase the ethnic diversity of their student body and faculty. As they market their respective academic, study abroad, and extracurricular programs to all prospective students, they also market themselves specifically to minority groups to encourage them to enroll. Colleges and universities may overrepresent minority students in their admissions visuals, painting a picture of a campus that is more diverse than it is in reality. This practice is one of many in the effort to diversify institutions of higher education.

Although universities use this strategy to bring in more ethnically diverse students, the retention rate of minorities continues to be consistently lower than that of their White peers (Shapiro, Dundar, Huie, Wakhungu, Yuan, Nathan, & Hwang, 2017), suggesting that something occurs after enrollment that prevents these students from continuing their education.

While it does not make sense to continue these practices without proof that they work, there is yet to be research conducted that compares a university's minority student enrollment and retention numbers to the rate at which minority students are represented in marketing visuals. This study first addresses whether a university's marketing visuals accurately represent the demographics of the campus. Next, the study addresses how each university's marketing tactics affect the enrollment and retention of its students who identify as Black or African American, and whether the university's enrollment and retention of its Black students changes in connection with the visual representation of Black students and faculty.

The study uses a content analysis to obtain data. By analyzing the Instagram accounts of three faith-based universities in the United States, the study aims to understand the rate at which Black individuals appear in each university's promotional efforts. This rate is then compared to

the university's enrollment and retention numbers of Black students in the succeeding year to see if there is any correlation between the two. These numbers are considered over a four-year span. As these types of marketing strategies can cause minority students to perceive the university as inclusive, the interaction of positive expectations from minority representation in visuals and lackluster campus climate is discussed.

Literature Review

Black students are over 20% less likely to graduate from college within six years than their White peers (Shapiro et al., 2017). In a study that analyzed the rate of degree completion based on ethnicity, Shapiro et al. (2017) found that Black students had a six-year degree completion rate of 45.9%, compared to White students' completion rate of 67.2% in the same amount of time and lower than the national average of 54.8%. Black men seem to struggle the most, having a stop-out rate of 41.1%—the highest of any group at public, four-year institutions. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have a better track record than Predominantly White Institutions (PWI), graduating Black students at a much higher rate (Provasnik & Shafer, 2005). Researchers have studied this disparity in college retention rates and attribute it to several factors, especially campus climate.

In contrast with previous models of student departure from higher education, which focused solely on the psychological aspects of the student, such as the ability to meet academic demands, personality, and motivation as reasons for withdrawing, Tinto (1987) proposed his Theory of Student Departure. Tinto saw that current models put all of the responsibility of departure either on the student or on external forces and missed the role that factors within the institution itself played in the decision. In order for students to have the best chance of completing their education, they must integrate well socially and academically (Tinto, 1987).

Tinto's theory claims that academic and social experiences at a university interact with a student's attributes, dispositions, and skills to either increase or decrease the likelihood of departure.

Helland, Stallings, and Braxton (2002) provided empirical evidence to verify part of Tinto's Theory of Student Departure. In studying the effect of expectation fulfillment on college students' departure decision, the researchers found that "the greater the extent to which a student's social expectations for college are met, the greater the student's degree of integration into the social communities of a college or university" (Helland et al., 2002, p. 393). According to Tinto's theory (1987), this increased integration leads to a decreased likelihood of college departure. With social integration playing such a large role in the decision to depart from college and with Black students dropping out at much higher rates than their White peers, it is important to identify elements in the recruitment process that may be preventing these students from fully integrating into their campus environment.

Because of their status as a minority group, Black students have a different experience in higher education than White students. Wirth (1941) defined a minority group as those who because of physical or social and cultural differences receive differential treatment and who regard themselves as a people apart. Such groups characteristically are held in lower esteem, are debarred from certain opportunities, or are excluded from full participation in our national life. Certain groups within our society occupy not merely a disadvantageous objective position but also tend to develop a conception of themselves as inferiors, as aliens, and as persecuted groups, which significantly affects their roles in the collective enterprises of the nation. (p. 415)

Using this definition to inform what groups qualify as ethnic minorities, this study will work with the understanding that Black students fit this definition of a minority group.

PWIs have specific difficulties when attempting to retain their Black students. College campus climate plays an important role in student retention since students naturally desire to stay where they feel accepted and welcome (McClain & Perry, 2017). Many students of color face microaggressions or even overt racist experiences on the campuses of PWIs on top of the usual difficulties of navigating college life. During interviews with different minority students about their college experiences, Wright (2008) found that Black students at a PWI do not feel that they have the privilege afforded to their White counterparts of being “just a student.” Instead, their uniqueness makes them hypervisible and more likely to be singled out by members of campus (Wright, 2008). While also navigating the usual stresses of college life as all students do, African American students effectively have to fight to be part of the community at a PWI.

Overt racist encounters can cause minorities to feel alienated, leading to isolation from the majority of the student body (Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002). Additionally, the number of faculty who come from a non-white ethnic group has lagged behind over the years despite the growth of minority student numbers (Jayakumar, Howard, Allen, & Han, 2009). Those faculty members of color who are present tend to hold lower ranks than their White counterparts. This lack of diversity in the professoriate limits institutions in their ability to create a campus climate that is welcoming to different ethnic backgrounds, despite appearing so from the outside.

Foss (2005) explains that rhetoric is not limited to words spoken or written down on a page, but also includes the messages we send visually. Aristotle (367-347/1984) defined rhetoric as “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” (p. 24). In her theory of visual rhetoric, Foss suggests that visual artifacts can be used to communicate with an

audience and can be analyzed in a very similar way to verbal rhetoric. For something to serve as an artifact of visual rhetoric, it must fulfill three criteria. An artifact of visual rhetoric must be symbolic, involve human intervention, and have an audience (Foss, 2005). Within these criteria, Foss highlights several visual forms that can serve as rhetoric, including dance, sculpture, paintings, and of particular interest for this study, photographs.

In his visual rhetorical study of a virtual university's promotional efforts, Kenney (2005) points out that, because of their unavoidably selective nature, all photographs are rhetorical. For universities, the purpose of their use of photography is to give prospective students an idea of what their college experience will be like, depending on what the school offers (Kenney, 2005). A visual rhetorical analysis of a school's visuals takes into account the historical context of the university, the images used, and evaluates the overall perceived effectiveness of those images to produce the desired rhetoric. Pippert, Essenburg, and Matchett (2013) understood how persuasive a university's rhetoric can be.

As the population of the United States grows increasingly more ethnically diverse, the need to reproduce that diversity in institutions of higher education and ensure that all Americans have equal access to education grows as well. Colleges and universities all over the United States use various marketing devices to recruit more students from diverse backgrounds. These institutions use visual tactics to display campus diversity, including photographs in admissions materials that overrepresent the campus's ethnic diversity (Pippert et al., 2013). Some have even gone so far as to digitally alter photographs to include faces of Black or African American students, sparking backlash (Pritchep, 2013; Cotovio & Mezzofiore, 2018; Jaschik, 2019).

Mayer (2014) emphasized that, "The development of a strong institutional brand should be of great importance to a school" (p. 1), when trying to gain a competitive advantage and

recruit more students. A university's brand, as Mayer defines it, is the set of characteristics that define the university and set it apart from the competition. Universities use their unique brand as a tool to recruit students. Not only is a university's brand formed through the actual characteristics of the school, like a good athletic program, prestigious alumni, and more; but it can also be influenced by the visual images that the university uses to portray itself and tell its story (Mayer, 2014). Branding a university to be appealing toward minority students and their needs, then, requires a purposive selection of images that tell the story of an inclusive and diverse campus.

Studies have shown that presenting ethnic diversity in marketing visuals has a powerful effect on minority viewers while having little effect on White viewers (Licsandru & Cui, 2019). This can be useful for marketing departments to remember when crafting promotional content that creates an appealing image of diversity to minorities. However, portraying these images without actions behind them can easily backfire on organizations because they are being dishonest about their diversity (Wilton, Bell, Vahradyan, Kaiser, 2020). This dishonesty can lead to mistrust in organizations and reduced desire among students to remain there.

Schools affiliated with Christian groups tend to be unlikely to overwhelmingly overrepresent their ethnic diversity (Hagenbuch, 2012). However, these universities are still susceptible to visual overrepresentation as they work to move past troubled racial pasts and diversify their campuses. Even if these methods are effective in recruiting Black or African American students, retention of these students still remains significantly lower than that of their White counterparts. This suggests that there are additional factors at play that prevent these students from completing their college education.

Among the religious bodies that have established and maintained Christian universities are the churches of Christ. The churches were formed with the desire to “speak where the Bible speaks, and be silent where the Bible is silent,” similar to Martin Luther’s Sola Scriptura, or Scripture Only. In the late 19th century, however, divisions began to occur between the religious groups formed after the Restoration Movement. According to Hosman (1970), the early motivation to establish Bible colleges was to combat the rise of Liberalism, which had begun to permeate many different religious bodies during the latter part of the 19th century and resulted in doctrinal debates over subjects such as the inclusion of instruments in worship. More conservative believers wanted an institution where leaders could be taught to combat religious liberalism. This resulted in the foundation of Bible colleges across several denominations. Christian liberal arts universities are distinct from the Bible college because, while they offer degrees that give students the opportunity to enter full-time ministry or mission work, their main focus is teaching the liberal arts “from a Christian perspective,” with a commitment to “integrating faith and learning” while providing vocational degrees (Franklin, 1995). These universities have a unique advantage over Bible colleges because they can recruit students from both religious and secular backgrounds.

The purpose of this study is to understand how predominantly White universities represent their ethnic diversity in marketing visuals and the effect that has on Black student enrollment and retention. The following research question grows out of conclusions gathered from studies by Pippert et al. (2013) and aims to fill a gap in the current body of research.

RQ1: How does the visual representation of Black individuals in marketing efforts affect Black student enrollment and retention at a predominantly White, faith-based university?

Although Hagenbuch (2012) found that faith-based universities were not very likely to overrepresent their ethnic diversity in visuals, the hypothesis instead follows the findings of Pippert et al. (2013), who found that schools overrepresent ethnic diversity in their marketing visuals. The first hypothesis comes from the aforementioned research.

H1: Predominantly White, faith-based universities overrepresent Black individuals in marketing visuals.

Based on research by Licsandru and Cui (2019) and observations by Mayer (2014), it is expected that this increased representation has a positive effect on the enrollment numbers of Black students, as they see the school as a place where they will fit in with others.

H2: The increased visual representation of Black individuals in marketing materials correlates with an increase in Black student enrollment.

After arriving on campus for classes and seeing the school's demographics in person, however, students may realize that they are still in the minority and that their expectations of campus climate and inclusivity do not match what they saw in the university's marketing visuals. This could lead to a consistently lower rate of retention among Black students compared to White students. This study follows the framework of previous studies that examined different pieces of the recruitment process for ethnic minorities (Hagenbuch, 2012; Pippert et al., 2013).

H3: The increased visual representation of Black individuals in marketing materials has no effect on Black student retention.

Based on previous studies and a review of relevant literature, the following methods were determined to be effective in testing these hypotheses.

Method

This mixed-method study consists of two parts: a content analysis of university Instagram accounts that seeks to understand what kind of ethnic diversity is visually represented by universities, and a comparison of that data to enrollment and retention rates of Black students. The design of this study is based on a previous study by Pippert et al. (2013) that examined the visual representation of ethnic minorities in college admissions materials (Pippert et al., 2013).

Sample

The data that was used to answer the research question was gathered from a convenience sample of predominantly White universities associated with the churches of Christ in the United States. Instagram accounts from these schools were analyzed to gather data about minority representation.

Convenience sampling has its flaws, namely the fact that the data gathered will not be completely representative of the whole population, limiting its generalizability. Despite these limitations, a convenience sample is one of the best methods to employ for this type of study, especially considering the time and resources available for this study. The data collected will still be useful and will give insight into the topic, which will then allow for future research to be done that can either be more generalizable or more in-depth.

Instruments

To understand how predominantly White, faith-based universities in the United States represent their ethnic diversity in marketing visuals, a content analysis method was used to count individuals in photographs on each university's Instagram account and classify them into an ethnic category. Instagram accounts for each university were accessed through the Instagram website. In order to code individuals as accurately as possible, coding was based on methods

used in a previous study by Pippert et al. (2013). Permission was obtained from the author to use this instrument. With this method, photographs were carefully coded by counting the prominent figures in each one to get a total of the individuals represented visually. Faces that were more than halfway obscured, excessively blurred due to depth of field, extremely small because they were at a distance and/or part of a crowd shot, or those that belonged to musicians who performed at the university were not included in the count, as those were assumed not to add to a viewer's perception of the campus's ethnic diversity. Once counted, individuals were then coded by ethnicity—Black, White, Hispanic, Asian, and Other. The classification of Hispanic was used in keeping with how each university classified their students. Because assuming an individual's race based on a single photograph requires care, it was important to follow the example of Pippert et al. (2013) and avoid personal bias by asking the question, "When viewing this photograph, would the average casual observer place the subject into a racial classification, and if so, which category would he or she be placed in?" (p. 269)

A four-year period of examination was chosen for the study, beginning with the first post on each account in August of 2015 and ending with the final post in July of 2019. The assumption was that posts created in the time between August and July were intended to reach students who would enroll the following August (posts between August 2015 and July 2016 would directly affect the incoming class for the fall of 2016, for example). While it can be argued that an analysis of more current posts is more valuable, these dates were chosen for two reasons. The first was to avoid photos posted during the COVID-19 pandemic, as they would largely contain faces that are obscured by protective face coverings which would make it difficult for both the researcher and usual audiences to identify an individual's ethnicity. The second was to avoid photos posted during the Black Lives Matter protests that occurred after the

deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery in the summer of 2020. During these protests, many organizations intentionally communicated their stances regarding diversity, and it was assumed that there would be an increase in photographic representation of diversity for posts made during that time. While the effects of this presumed increase could provide interesting information, that time period was excluded from the study so that trends under normal circumstances could be examined.

To ensure that individuals were counted and coded as accurately as possible, another individual was asked to code a portion of the photographs from the Instagram accounts using the same parameters as the principal researcher. This individual reviewed a year of posts from one university's account, which amounted to 104 posts. The two sets of results from each observer were then compared to see how many times there was an exact match agreement on the same photo. This comparison was run for each ethnic category on each photo, for a total of five comparisons per photo. Because this study focused on the representation of Black students at a PWI, the reliability of categorizing Black and White individuals was of primary interest. For Black individuals, there was an 81.73% agreement between the researchers. For White individuals, the agreement was 53.85%. This method of determining reliability is admittedly limited in that it requires coders to come to the exact same conclusion on each photograph. This is beneficial when both coders agree that a photograph pictures six individuals who are Black, but if one coder instead says that only five of the individuals are Black, then it is no longer an exact match and reliability drops.

The second part of the study took data gathered from the photographs and compared it with enrollment and retention numbers using two separate Pearson Correlation tests to determine if there was a significant correlation between increased visual representation and increased

enrollment and retention of Black students. The particular hypotheses that were tested statistically were examined at an alpha level of 0.05. IRB exemption was obtained, as no personal information about participants was accessible to the researcher.

Results

Out of 1836 total Instagram posts on three accounts from 2015 to 2019, the majority (1587) of posts contained photos, with 204 containing videos. Across the three accounts, the photographs contained 3465 individuals who met the requirements for visibility. Of these individuals, 2778 (80.17%) were coded as White, 460 (13.28%) as Black, 131 (3.78%) as Hispanic, 56 (1.62%) as Asian, and 40 (1.15%) as Other. Enrollment and retention data, including specific demographic information for each year's incoming freshman class, was provided by administrators at each university. Each hypothesis was tested using data gathered from the content analysis and from each university. These results emerged.

H1: Predominantly White, faith-based universities overrepresent Black individuals in marketing visuals.

It was expected that the schools examined would use strategies similar to the schools observed in the study conducted by Pippert et al. (2013). However, when the data was calculated, the average difference in representation and the actual population of Black students had an overall high of 6.01% and a low of 1.11%, for an average overrepresentation of 3.50% across the three schools. These results align with those found by Hagenbuch (2012), who found that there was no statistically significant overrepresentation of students of color in promotional materials used by several Christian universities.

H2: The increased visual representation of Black individuals in marketing materials correlates with an increase in Black student enrollment.

To test the second hypothesis, the change in representation rates for Black individuals each year was compared to the change in enrollment rates for the incoming freshman class. It was expected that an increase in representation one year would correlate with an increase in enrollment the next, and potentially at a similar or consistent rate. For example, if representation increased 20% in 2018 as compared to 2017, it was expected that enrollment would increase for the 2018 freshman class, either at the same rate or a rate that would indicate that the use of the photographs had at least some effect on enrollment. Using a Pearson Correlation test, the amount of change in representation from one year to the next was compared to the change in enrollment for the following year to determine if there was any relation between the two. For example, the amount of change in 2017 from the previous year's photos was compared to the incoming freshman class of 2017, as it was assumed that those posts were primarily aimed at marketing toward that year's incoming class. While both enrollment and representation changed from year to year, it was determined that these changes did not lead to a statistically significant correlation between the two variables.

H3: The increased visual representation of Black individuals in marketing materials has no effect on Black student retention.

Retention data was gathered from administrators and from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) website. The NCES website provided general retention percentages for members of the 2014 cohort who graduated within 6 years, while the data provided by administrators told what percentage of Black students were retained from the fall of their freshman year to the fall of their sophomore year. The average gap in retention of Black students compared to White students at these universities was 23.7%. The retention rate for students who enrolled at the three universities between 2015 and 2019 and stayed at least until the fall of

sophomore year was 73.97%. When retention rates were compared to changes in representation for each year, there was no significant correlation found between the two based on the data that was gathered.

Discussion

There are many reasons why a student may not complete their college education. Finances and life circumstances play a vital role in the ability to complete an education and are often out of the student's control. While it is possible that Black students have different experiences and difficulties in these areas than their White peers, this study examined how the stories universities tell through photographs affect the enrollment and retention of Black students. As Tinto (1987) suggested, the ability to integrate academically and socially to a student's university has a large impact on their desire to complete their education, and as McClain and Perry (2017) found, students naturally choose to stay in environments where they feel welcome. Including photos of ethnically diverse individuals in photos used for marketing efforts can give minorities the impression that they will find people ethnically similar to them on campus (Licsandru & Cui, 2019), but can backfire when students realize that their university is not as diverse as it appeared (Wilton et al. 2020). Honest and careful communication about where a university stands in its diversity and where it wants to be is important, as it is arguably easier to give a negative impression than a positive one. The results of this study did not produce any examples of significant overrepresentations of Black individuals, but that does not mean that marketing visuals always portray an accurate picture of diversity (Pippert et al. 2013). Because of the sampling method used and the size of the sample, the results of this study are limited in their generalizability. Future studies could overcome this by recreating this study and collecting a random sample of faith-based universities, or by studying the entire population.

Instagram is a relatively young social media platform, starting in 2010. As with all social media platforms, Instagram is constantly changing designs and algorithms that require users to adapt the way they use the platform. Because of these factors, there was a clear and observable difference between strategies used by the universities in 2015 and those used in 2019. While it can be an effective method for reaching and engaging audiences, an analysis of Instagram posts does not provide the same consistent historical data that could be obtained from communication tools that have been used much longer, like physical admissions materials. Digital media is also less resource intensive than printed media, which is often more curated and longer lasting. This fast-changing nature means that photos posted online arguably go through a less selective process before they are published, as they will quickly be forgotten in favor of the next upcoming post. Instagram is a useful way to market a university to prospective students through the primary university account, but it can be reasonably argued that a school has a varied audience to reach. Social media has the power to communicate with current students, alumni, donors, prospective students, and more, but falls short in focusing on one particular audience. Future research could examine communication avenues that are more pointed toward prospective students and have more long-term data to more realistically compare trends.

Lastly, both the literature reviewed for this study and its results lead to questions that can be addressed in future studies. How do minority students feel about the representation of their respective groups at the university they choose to attend? If their university accurately displays campus diversity in visuals, do minority students instead perceive themselves to be underrepresented? If a university significantly overrepresents campus diversity, do students recognize that overrepresentation and does it affect their ability to integrate into the campus

community? Future research could address the actual perceptions created by displaying diversity and how, if at all, that affects students' desire to remain at their university.

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