
Discourse Analysis of Higher Education Website Content

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Abstract: In this research work the authors examine how colleges and universities use language to represent themselves on their institutional official websites. The authors study and report about how some (local to their geographic location) colleges and universities create and maintain a distinctive identity in an effort to build legitimacy towards their status and attract students and thus revenue. The approach utilizes Discourse Analysis (DA) to examine the language on the institutional official websites since institutional websites are increasingly important to the admissions and marketing practices of colleges and universities due to their ability to rapidly communicate a significant amount of content to a vast audience. The findings suggest that colleges and universities hold a significant amount of control over the information the visitor has access to on their website. Additionally, the authors found that this content control has led to a reduced sharing of scholarly material associated with higher education while the intangibles available to the prospective student are now at the forefront of representations on the websites studied. The results of this study will be very useful to educational leaders when making policy decisions related to marketing and recruitment.

Keywords: Discourse Analysis, Discourse and Power, Higher Education Website Policy

1. Introduction

The debate of the purpose, function and perception about institutions of higher education is of importance in this information age [3] [11] [10]. In this research the authors will use Discourse Analysis (DA) [7] to disassemble and analyze the words and images that local colleges and universities (in the authors' geographical area) use on their respective websites. The selected universities (see Table 1) for this study vary greatly in enrollment numbers, tuition, and are both a selection of private and public schools. The similarities and differences in these schools will give the study a very good sample representation for analyzing them using DA. The universities will be examined based on their classes which are split between schools with less than or greater than \$15,000 in average tuition dues (for the year 2017).

In particular, the relationship between the universities' use of words and images used in different and similarly classed categories will be examined to investigate if differences in the schools' target audience is a factor of significance in content choices. For the schools that it applies to, the authors

will be looking at how sports can influence their marketable content. The analysis will focus on whether the class of the school reflects any major changes to their target market. (Note to the readers: The University websites listed in Table 1 were accessed for this research work between Jan 1, 2017 and September 09, 2017).

2. Methods

To simulate the experience that a prospective student may have when attempting to navigate a university's website; similar pages relevant to the matter being examined were examined as much as possible across the list. For the purpose of class examination the authors looked at the home/landing webpage and the "about us" or informational page. These will be referred to as the base set of pages because these pages are commonly found on all the university websites that the authors examined. When the authors examined universities that had a strong focus on sports the authors also included any relevant sports specific pages that are accessible from the base pages via direct hyperlink, an example of this

is the web link labelled “Athletics” or “Sports”. Finally, for the examination based on diversity and the protected classes the authors examined any specifically accessible diversity related pages as long as they were directly accessible from the base pages. Within these pages the authors will not only look for similar language but also images that may have been carefully placed there for a specific impression/message to be

conveyed to the visitor. (Note to the readers: There will of course be some degree of subjective-ness in this research since in an investigation like this that is unavoidable; however, the authors will make every attempt to provide explanation justifying the reasoning behind the research findings and its corresponding inferences).

Table 1. List of Universities investigated in this paper.

| Class A (>\$15,000 = Grey), Class B (<\$15,000) | | | |
|---|------------|----------------------------|------------------------|
| University | Enrollment | Average Tuition (In-State) | Highest Degree Offered |
| Purdue University | 39,409 | \$10,002 | Graduate |
| Indiana University Southeast | 6,173 | \$7,073 | Graduate |
| University of Kentucky | 29,727 | \$11,484 | Graduate |
| Bellarmino University | 3,846 | \$39,350 | Graduate |
| Sullivan University | 2,617 | \$19,740 | Graduate |
| Ivy Tech of Sellersburg | 7,038 | \$3,995 | Associates |
| University of Indianapolis | 5,504 | \$27,420 | Undergraduate |
| Indiana Wesleyan University | 3,318 | \$25,346 | Graduate |
| Ball State University | 21,196 | \$9,654 | Graduate |
| Indiana State University | 13,583 | \$8,746 | Graduate |
| Butler University | 4,798 | \$38,405 | Graduate |
| University of Louisville | 21,295 | \$10,738 | Graduate |

3. Examination Based on

3.1. School Class

The authors start with the differentiation that induces the biggest gap between universities in their marketing and that is the cost of tuition [5]. In The list of 12 universities and schools (see Table 1) there is a good mix of different tuition

levels to be examined. To make identifying simpler the authors have broken them up into two classes, class A - universities that carry an average tuition over \$15,000 and then class B in which average tuition is under \$15,000. In the examination between class A and class B universities the authors shall look for words and images that give off a perception or theme of prestige. For many, the cost of tuition may be a direct sign of a more prestigious school [2].



Figure 1. Use of Language on the Butler University website (<https://www.butler.edu/> - accessed 03/03/17).



Figure 2. Use of Imagery on the Indiana State University website (<http://www.indstate.edu/> - accessed 03/03/17).

A first examination of class A ‘home pages’ results in only one of the 5 listed schools showing any signs of pronounced prestige and it’s a small case at that. The home page of Butler

University out of Indianapolis shows off their very castle like buildings as well as a front and center section for student success stories. Student success stories are not a bad thing per say however all are affixed with a small caption giving themselves (using the school’s words and not the student’s quotes...see Figure 1) praise for the students success. This is the closest indication to a somewhat prestigious homepage albeit a weak claim.

Switching over to the class B home pages the authors saw a very similar story. In only 1 of the 7 class B schools that the authors examined did the authors find a display of prestige on the website using imagery and video. The Indiana State University website had a video background playing as soon as the website loaded. The video showed many different clips but included in the imagery were images of an expensive water feature on campus (see Figure 2) – presenting the viewers with a desirable place with a classy appearance.

When the authors examined the ‘About’ page from the class A sample the authors immediately noticed a different

story. 3 of the 5 universities show what could be considered prestigious images and text. First off is Bellarmine University which has a nice and modest but visually pleasing campus picture, however right below it the heading states *"The premier independent catholic university in the south"* [1]. It is obvious that they want to be seen by prospective students as a premium, at least in the catholic faith based school line up. If you continue to scroll down the extensive page you see more and more evidence of this. They flaunt about their location and they go on at length about the high end amenities that are close by. In the next two segments they inform us that they are a campus that is growing on to everyone's list of top schools as well as that they have 176 full time faculty with a 81 percent holding a Ph.D. or the highest degree offered in their field. While this may be considered relevant from an educational perspective, the language and presentation is more suggestive of communication aimed at justifying that the high cost of tuition is well worth the investment. It is however interesting because, as you scroll to the tuition and fee portion the first line in the paragraph is *"Don't overreact to the price of an education, but focus on its much lower actual cost to you, and its enormously high value as an investment in your future."* They continue on by stating that the cost of an excellent private education, like the one you'll get there, in a secure investment for your future.

In comparison, The University of Indianapolis was more modest in their brag. On their 'about Uindy' page they do mention that they are a highly distinguished school affiliated with the united Methodist church. This school's website is without a doubt the most modest of the sample set the authors examined in this category; however their content was mostly an attempt to justify their higher price tag. Butler University is yet again advertising their class with a short and sweet statement about themselves which includes that they were rated by news and world report among the top schools in the country for enriched offerings. When the authors looked up the 'About Butler/At a Glance' section on their website, the authors were greeted with 'The Basic of Butler' link. Following the link the authors found a page that goes on about their accolades and achievements. So, from the class A school websites that the authors examined the authors found that Butler University gives off the biggest, expected vibe in that they are a classical college of education that you may imagine from movies or shows and they want to present their potential students to this image when they are considering applying for university admission. (Note to the readers: Universities flaunting educational achievements is not a negative thing [9]; however this is an examination of how these accolades are used as marketing material to future students).

The class B "About Us" pages that the authors examined were undeniably different than the class A school website content. Many of the class B universities went in depth about their community involvement and their beliefs. This was in sharp contrast to how the class A schools used their 'about' pages - to justify their cost and to fortify their worth. The 'about' pages on the class B university websites modestly

displayed their university pride especially in a manner that was not overbearing. Many of the class B schools chose to talk about their history which goes on to prove their truly humble beginnings. Many of these schools were not started by a rich scholar but started as small state schools and grew from there. For example, University of Louisville, like others in this category, chose to use their 'About' page to display their Mission Statement.

Thus, examining these 2 types of vital information sources (the landing page and the about page) on school and university websites has provided evidence to what is being marketed. It is evident that all the schools in the sample set (irrespective of the class) were marketing themselves to match the image of a school or university from popular media depending on their target population. For example, while some were catering to an audience looking for a historical and prestigious endeavor for intellectuals, others were more diversified to attract a wider range of recruits.

3.2. Sports Marketing

College sports are an ever expanding business [6]. Universities are raking in millions of dollars a year on their sporting programs. This huge popularity has given colleges a new pedestal to stand on when it comes to marketing and marketability to potential students. Many universities show immense pride in their sports teams and often that is the sole identifier for the institution, above even their educational achievements [8]. Here the authors look at the schools (in the sample set) that have a large sports program and investigate if their website content marketing strategy changes because of that or if they show more similarities to the standard schools that are without a sports program.

Looking at the 12 different universities in the sample set the authors notice that they all have some form of sports program in place. The examination thus focusses on whether and how the universities use their sports program information or not towards marketing on their official websites.

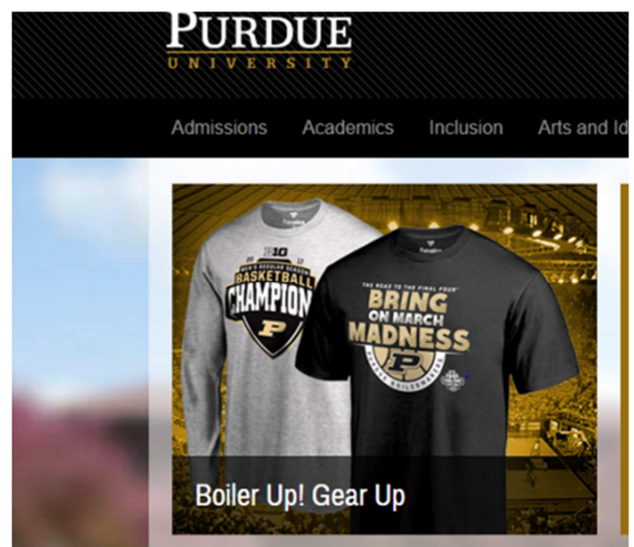


Figure 3. Use of Sports Imagery on the Purdue University website (<https://www.purdue.edu/> - accessed 03/06/17).

The authors will begin with Purdue University. Purdue University, on its home page has an eye catching image of their sportswear - basketball T-shirts. This does paint the picture that the university has a significant sports team implying that they have a sports program in place (see Figure 3). The advertisement isn't bold or overly obtrusive and so does not seem like a new student marketing ploy to get students to join the university solely to be a member of the team (since no explicit statements to that effect have been made). It also appears that their 'about' section shows no mention of sports what's-so-ever; it effectively stays on task of talking about their academics solely. Now the homepage of Purdue University does have a hyper link to an Athletics page. Upon following this link a potential student is greeted by a very modest sports page that equally denotes space to both small and big athletics. They do have links to more information about on campus sports activities as well as a link to a specific sports page which is where one would go to find out information about their big league sports. Based on the pages that were examined Purdue University does not flaunt their sports program as a reason to join their university.

Next up is Indiana University Southeast (IUS). IUS is a satellite campus of Indiana University (IU), so with that being said it is important to note that their homepage shows no marketing of IU or IUS sports team. The homepages and their 'About us' pages as well do not have a menu tab for 'Athletics'. Clearly, university sports are not being used as a web recruitment tool by IUS.

Examining the University of Kentucky (UK) website was in contrast to the observations so far. At the first loading of their home page, they have a scrolling slide show. While most slides are academic based, some are sports inspired. The very first image that the authors encountered in the slide show is that of an older gentlemen holding a baseball bat that linked to a colligate sports based article (<http://www.uky.edu/UKHome/> - accessed 03/06/17). Scrolling down the authors see multiple pictures of students at UK games and the use of the hashtag #BBN which commonly stands for Big Blue Nation or the signifier for their sports fan base. Also, they reference new students as joining "Big Blue Nation" and thus they are seen clearly connecting their students with the identity of their sports team. In addition, on their homepage there is a direct link to their athletics section that leads to a sub menu which displays options for campus recreational sports options, intermural sports, options for team apparel sales, ticket sales, and finally a link which directs you to ukathletics.com which is their webpage dedicated to their National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) ranked sports teams. In summary, there is no denying that UK does take pride in their sports division and are not hesitant to use that to convince new students to join them.

Ivy Tech – Sellersburg, being a small community college, does not have any form of a sport program, and so there is no mention of sports what-so-ever on their website, not even a recreational intermural style sports agenda. Very much like Ivy Tech, Sullivan University also does not have any mention of athletics on their website. The authors can presume that

since Sullivan targets non-traditional students its design supposes that the target students most likely do not have the time for campus activities since they could be education and post education job driven. This assumption stems from the observation that most of their marketing is centered on students who are graduating and finding careers.

The University of Louisville (UoL) is much like the University of Kentucky (UK) in that they are a nationally ranked school for college athletics however the authors see a significant difference in their website design. UoL's website has very little mention of their sports team - Louisville Cardinals - on any of their academic based pages that the authors examined. It can be safely assumed that UoL prides itself on its educational value over their sports involvement when selling themselves on their website to potential students. Bellarmine University is local to the Louisville area and when the authors examined their website the authors found that they do have a school sports team that has a dedicated webpage that is linked from the home page providing information to fans of events as well as providing recognition to the student athletes. The use of their sports program for recruitment marketing was minimal. The fact there is little mention of their sports team on anything but their athletics page signifies that they depend on academic information alone for their recruitment efforts on the webfront.

The University of Indianapolis web homepage had no indication of their use of sports as an attention getter. Their athletics page is where things take a little bit of a turn. Unlike the athletics pages of many of the schools the authors have looked at where the page was more centered on getting information to the fan base as opposed to the potential student, University of Indianapolis is seen marketing their sports program to potential students. They boast about the high average GPA of their athletics students on the website. They also mention their national ranking and information about sports based scholarships. It is impressive to see how they keep education at the core of their values while still targeting the athletic students' drive to be a college athlete into their recruitment strategy.

FUTURE STUDENTS | FACULTY & STAFF | CURRENT STUDENTS | PARENTS

BUTLER UNIVERSITY

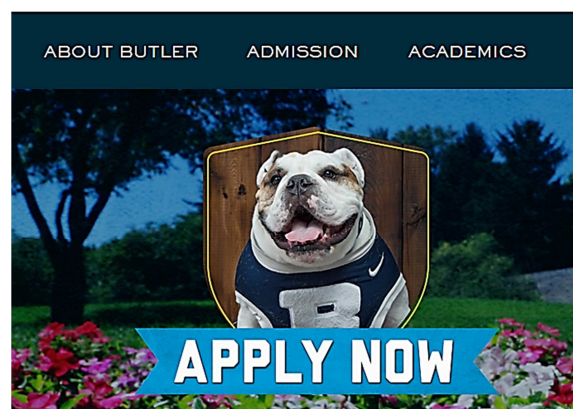


Figure 4. Use of Sports Imagery on the Butler University website (<https://www.butler.edu/> - accessed 09/09/17).

Indiana Wesleyan University (IWU) is a Christian based private college that has a small NCAA team that is in a lower division. Understandably they do not market to potential students with their sports program and only mention to it on their fan based athletics page. Their athletics page is mostly game schedules and student callouts. Most of their marketing is centered on their faith and educational values. The final university the authors examined in this category was Butler University (BU). The authors found that on the homepage, BU is seen priding upon their sports mascot (see Figure 4). Upon examining the 'at a glance' page as mentioned in the school class category, the authors found that BU is not hesitant in mentioning their impressive selection of sports options including NCAA as well as club and intramural sports. Also, the authors found that the BU athletics page is a modest informational page towards potential students giving as much praise to their NCAA teams as they are to their intramural sports. In summary, there is no denying that BU does take pride in their sports division and are not hesitant to use that to convince new students to join them.

4. Conclusion

Based on the investigation the authors found that school, colleges and universities in the sample set, without a doubt, use their website as not only a resource for students but as useful marketing material to entice potential students into their schools. In a world where the internet is the sole source of information available for many potential students, the first exposure to an educational institution is now its website [4]. Thus, how the institution market themselves on their website can be pivotal in whether a student wants to consider attending that institution. From the analysis the authors found that some institutions chose to take a classic "Greek Life" prestigious route which entices students into a campus life of class and honor while others decided to target the students who want to be a part of or associated with a nationally ranked sports team. This is important given institutions have dedicated budgets assigned to keep their websites carefully updated and targeted for the maximum effect on their student recruitment efforts [12].

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