ABSTRACT

Recently, universities have started diversity initiatives on their campuses (Martinez-Acosta & Favero, 2018). One recruitment strategy is prominently picturing minorities throughout university websites and recruitment materials. However, this portrayal may not accurately represent the population. In a content analysis of 10,000 photographs from 165 institutions, Pippert, Eisenburg, and Matchett (2013) found that photographs portrayed minority percentages were significantly different for each race studied. Based on the Similarity-Attraction Theory, individuals are attracted to those similar to themselves, resulting in higher social integration and more communication (Rupert, Jhin, Engen, & Reven, 2009), suggesting that the over- portrayal of minority populations may be intentional. While this may initially attract minority students to a university, little is known about how minority or majority students perceive the discrepancy between representation and actuality, or whether this difference is even salient. Research on organizational identification (OI) suggests that diversity represents a unique difference that strengthens students’ OI with the university, but whether OI plays a role in intensifying or mitigating the effects of misrepresentation is unknown. This study examines UW-Eau Claire students’ perceptions on diversity messaging and the possible association between OI and message accuracy. Results may help universities improve message design for diversity recruitment and retention.

INTRODUCTION

- About 90% of U.S. companies are using websites to recruit individuals (cf. Cober, Brown, Blumenthal, Doverspike, & Levy, 2000 as cited in Ash, Dineen & Noe, 2002), which shows the importance of the messaging organizations use to recruit on their websites.
- Pippert, Eisenburg, and Matchett (2013) performed a content analysis of 10,000 photographs from 165 four-year schools in the U.S. to determine the accuracy of diversity portrayal, and they found a significant difference between the actual student population and the photographic portrayal for each racial group.
- The Similarity-Attraction Theory states that people are attracted to organizations that provide personal and relevant environmental cues (Ash, Dineen & Noe, 2002).
- Greater attraction to an organization tends to be linked to higher levels of person-organization fit (Ash et al., 2002).
- Although extensive research has been done on diversity shown in university messaging, there is still a gap in research on the possible association between perceptions of promotional materials and students’ identification.

METHOD

Data was collected from 215 UW-Eau Claire undergraduate students across all majors, ages, genders, and ethnicities using a Qualtrics survey. The 34-question survey measured two distinct areas of information: university messaging and organizational identification. The first 23 questions focused on a student’s organizational identification, determined using the Organizational Identification (OI) Questionnaire created by Cheney (1983). Sample question using five-point Likert scale:

I find that my values and the values of UWEC are very similar.

The OI scale was reliable, α = .86, M = 84.33, SD=11.56.

The next question was open-ended, asking what makes UW-Eau Claire unique. The next six questions focused on university messaging and students’ perceptions of six images found on the UW-Eau Claire website.

Students’ perceptions of minority representation used in university messaging was measured using the following two questions:

- These photos reflect an accurate representation of the student body at UW-Eau Claire.
- UW-Eau Claire promotional materials (website, brochures, posters) accurately represent the current proportion of minority to majority students on campus.

The final four questions asked about student demographics.

RESULTS

Table 1: Correlations

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Significance</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived accurate representation of the student body based on the shown photos is associated with organizational identification</td>
<td>p &lt; .001</td>
<td>r = .32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived accurate proportion of minority students shown on promotional materials is associated with organizational identification</td>
<td>p &lt; .05</td>
<td>r = .16</td>
</tr>
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</table>

OTHER SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

- Photos had positive impact on decision to attend UW-Eau Claire was associated with OI, r = .40, p < .001
- Stronger identification with UW-Eau Claire based on the images shown was associated with OI, r = .50, p < .001
- Importance of minority representation on promotional materials was associated with OI, r = .26, p < .001

DISCUSSION

Strongly identifying with an organization helps members make sense of experiences, achieve decisions, and organize thoughts (Ferraris et al., 1993). This is important to universities as the identification of a student could impact current and future involvement, with potential implications for later donations and pride in the university.

These results point to one way universities can work to strengthen OI, i.e. by accurately portraying minorities. Our findings show a statistically significant correlation between students’ perceptions of minority representation used in university messaging and OI. This may impact decisions made about how the university recruits and retains both minority and majority students.

We also discovered that the significance between specific images shown in the survey and OI was stronger than the significance between promotional materials generally used by the university and OI. This may be because diversity is a topic of frequent and passionate conversation and the desire to have a more diverse campus is widely known. The belief that UW-Eau Claire is not promoting diversity well enough could create a general perception among students that the university is not doing as much as they actually are.

However, these results must consider that the majority of the survey population identified as caucasian; gauging a minority student’s perception of minority representation in university messaging was difficult and presented a limitation to the research. Our research initially attempted to study whether minority students felt they are, or should be, accurately represented in university promotional materials, but there were not enough minority responses to do so. Future research should be done on a campus that traditionally draws from outlying areas and one that has a more racially diverse population.

Graph 1: Participant Ethnicity

REFERENCES

3. (Ferraris et al., 1993).
5. Pippert, Eisenburg, and Matchett (2013)