

# Message Strategies of North American For-Profit Colleges and Universities: A Qualitative Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

A decade ago For-Profit Colleges and Universities (FPCUs) were experiencing booming enrollments and were well-positioned to take advantage of the opportunities presented through online learning platforms. Due to regulatory changes and heightened awareness of the low retention and graduation rates of these institutions, enrollment has plummeted and several major firms, including Sanford Brown and ITT have closed. Competition for students has intensified with a greater proportion of revenue being allocated toward marketing. In fact, for some FPCU marketing spending now exceeds the amount of money spent on their core service, teaching. This paper examines the message strategies of North American For-Profit Colleges and Universities for advertisements posted on YouTube from October, 2016 to October, 2018. Using a Grounded Theory Study approach to qualitative analysis, the authors evaluate 40 ads from 15 postsecondary institutions that have accredited degree granting programs of study (i.e., offering associate's, bachelor's, master's and/or Ph.D. degrees). Research findings show four representative themes within the industry sector: convenience, path to a better life, we care about our students, and legitimacy. These themes vary significantly from those employed by non-profit colleges and universities in North America. These messages speak directly to the challenges faced by older, non-traditional college students, as well as the stigmas associated with for-profit colleges. Theoretical analysis and implications of these themes for the for-profit educational sector are examined and discussed.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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