Intersecting inequalities in Higher Education: Reaching out to LGBT-identified students on Universities Marketing Communications

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:
Universities
Higher Education
Marketing Communcation
LGBT
Equality
Content Analysis

The marketisation of higher education has led to increasing emphasis on universities to market themselves to prospective students, competitions among all institutions – not just the very best to attract perspective students. Previous studies has suggested that educational qualifications, geographical mobility and financial considerations affects students choice of Universities and more likely universities will be presenting these information to attract prospective students. This research goes outside these conventional marketing appeal to consider if sexual orientation of students are considered as an advertising appeal and reaching out to prospective LGBT students, after all in the same vein as the Guardian and Times Higher Education Ranking of Universities, Stonewall, a UK charity that works for the equal rights of LGBT people, compiles the 'Gay by Degree' ranking of universities in UK, rating how gay-friendly these universities are. Results indicated that unlike disability or race, sexual orientation is seldom considered in University marketing communication, suggesting the need to intersect this inequalities in higher education recruitments.

Introduction

Over the past few years, the landscape of the UK has changed with regards to equality and diversity policy in higher education, suggesting the need to identify how unique and different individuals are (Ahmed, 2012). The United Kingdom is considered a racially and culturally diverse country, and it is important to identify the implications of this in the competitive higher education, prospective students make enquires about the best universities to cater to their needs, suggesting that universities need to do more than ever before to attract and retain the best students; this includes creating a welcoming and supportive environment for a diverse student body.

Previous studies has suggested that educational qualifications, geographical mobility and financial considerations affects students choice of Universities (Tackey and Aston, 1999) and more likely universities will be presenting these information to attract prospective students. As

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Mogaji (2014) explored the portrayal of students from black and ethnic minority group on University websites, this research goes outside the conventional marketing appeal to consider diversity and in particular if sexual orientation of students are considered as an advertising appeal and reaching out to prospective LGBT students, after all there is the 'Gay by Degree' ranking of universities in UK, rating how gay-friendly these universities are.

This research aims to add to the empirical research on Universities' marketing practises particular in the United Kingdom by identify the advertising appeals used by these Universities to reach out to prospective students.

Literature Review

Within this section, we present an examination of several relevant literatures around Universities marketing communications visual and textual content, advertising appeals, Higher Education in UK and the rationale for this study.

Images featured on universities' websites are purposefully selected by marketing teams to reach out to various stakeholders, but from a prospective student's point of view, how does the content on these websites reflect the university communities and the opportunities that exist in reality? Do the images on university websites and prospectuses reflect a community where all students will feel welcome and happy?

As extensive body of research focuses on homophobia in educational settings, highlighting the cultural and institutional discrimination that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) individuals experience at the student and staff level (Taulke-Johnson, 2010); this study explores intersecting inequalities in higher education through the prism of LGBT-identified people as portrayed on universities' marketing materials.

Cegler (2012) acknowledges that the active recruitment of LGBT-identified students by admissions offices in higher education is an emerging trend. Moreover, with the record number of university places available, Hannah Kibirige, education policy and campaigns officer at Stonewall noted that prospective students who identify as LGBT would want to study where they will be supported and developed. It is also suggested that LGBT students will attend Universities in gay friendly cities; Brighton, Cardiff, Edinburgh, London and Manchester have been identified as the top gay friendly cities in UK. It is expected that these universities will be portrayed as appealing to LGBT-identified people.

In the same vein as the Guardian and Times Higher Education Ranking of Universities, Stonewall, a UK charity that works for the equal rights of LGBT people, compiles the 'Gay by Degree' ranking of universities in UK, rating how gay-friendly these universities are . It is expected that the high ranking universities will make this an appealing factor for prospective students; indeed, as with other rankings, universities take pride in it and display it on their website.

Methodology

In order to gather information relevant information to answer the research questions, content analysis was adopted. Berelson (1952:18) offered one of the most widely accepted definitions - a technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication. This method can be quantitative when applied to examining communication content which as well allows researchers the ability to gain insight, increase understanding, and acquire meaningful practical information about a phenomenon (Kassarjian, 1977; Krippendorff, 2004, 2013). McMillan, 2000, p. 80 described it "as a microscope that brings communication messages

into focus". The works of Pate et al (2014) to examine how disability was displayed on American University websites was found relevant to this study and their methodology was adopted.

Nejati et. al (2011) argued that content analysis is one of the most suitable method for analysing website content, this has also been proved by various other researchers who has adopted the method to analysis web sites of Fortune 100 companies (Perry & Bodkin, 2000), Hotel websites (Hsieh, 2012), and the brand promise messages within UK university web sites (Chapleo et al 2011). Content analysis was therefore deemed appropriate for this research.

Mogaji (2016) adopted same methods to explore UK Universities websites, Saichaie & Morphew (2014) had also deemed it suitable as well to use this method to better understand how websites portray the purpose of attending Universities and colleges in USA, and they noted that because textual and visual components are vehicles of communication on websites, content analysis is well-suited.

The sample for this research consisted slide images of 134 UK universities websites and 2014/2015 prospectuses. As advised by Mogaji (2015), coding systems that enable the researcher to observe the content of communication and categorise is required, the coding identifies the unit of analysis as at least one human character/model displayed in a dominating shot on the websites or featured in the prospectuses portrayed as LGBT-identified or along with gay iconography such as the rainbow, freedom rings and the pink triangle.

Results

The result website analysis indicated that the focus was more on the Universities' research activities and ranking, as prospective LGBT students were not targeted through the website homepages, there was no indication of models (students) portrayed in a same-sex relationship on the website or messages relating to LGBT, While some universities highlighted their ranking on the green league, celebrating their environmental and ethical performance; in contrast, their ranking on 'Gay by Degree' was not indicated on the homepage but in the news section. Universities in gay-friendly cities did not highlight these on their websites either.

The prospectuses, however, were considerably different, taking into consideration that they do contain a considerably higher number of images compared to the websites. Images of same-sex student couples were featured, but it was not clear if the images were representing a same-sex relationship between students or if the models were posing as friends.

As Kittle and Ciba (2001) identified, the appropriate use of images can make a student consider the university a place where they feel welcome, as seeing a vibrant and diversified community may make them want to join university life. Oakenfull and Greenlee (2005) suggested that using imagery that is not detected as such by mainstream consumers might be the key to targeting LGBT people, and identify gay iconography and references to 'family' and 'pride'. Other alternative will be to show students with 'alternative' gender presentations to suggest a mix of student identities.

Conclusion

Naude and Ivy (1999) observed that aggressive marketing by academic institutions is used to gain a market share; it would not be surprising, therefore, if some other universities attempted to attract prospective students through this prism, making their Universities appealing towards LGBT. As Hartley and Morphew (2008) suggested, images and symbols presented in marketing materials constitute the basis upon which institutions begin forming a relationship with their students.

The outcomes of the study are relevant to stakeholders, including policy makers, academic researchers and especially the marketing communication and recruitment departments of the universities, which must strive to show a diverse institution by featuring more individuals from minority groups.

As with any other study, this research had some limitations and the findings should therefore be interpreted in relation to these limitations. As stereotypical portrayals are being avoided, the difficulties in identifying images targeted at LGBT people are acknowledged as a limitation. The seasonal bias induced by a sample of websites collected over a period of time could be considered a major limitation, as websites change their appearance quite often.

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