Limitations of Grad Cafe Data Analysis

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Module 3: SQL Data Analysis Assignment

Inherent Limitations of Anonymous Submission Data

The analysis of grad school admission data from anonymously submitted sources like Grad Cafe reveals several inherent limitations that significantly impact the reliability and representativeness of the findings. First, the self-selection bias is profound: students who choose to share their admission results on public forums may not represent the broader applicant pool. Those with exceptional scores or outcomes (either very high or very low) are more likely to post, creating a biased sample that skews toward extremes. Additionally, the voluntary nature of submissions means that successful candidates might be more motivated to share their achievements, while rejected applicants might be less inclined to publicize their disappointments. This reporting bias can artificially inflate both the average test scores and acceptance rates observed in the data, making the sample unrepresentative of the true applicant population.

Furthermore, the anonymous and unverified nature of these submissions introduces significant data quality concerns that distinguish this source from official institutional data. Without verification mechanisms, there is no way to ensure the accuracy of reported GPAs, test scores, or even admission outcomes. Some users might exaggerate their qualifications or fabricate results entirely, while others might misremember or misreport their actual scores. The example of GRE quantitative scores averaging 165 in grad school submissions versus the official 2023 average of 157 perfectly illustrates this phenomenon. This 8-point difference likely reflects the combined effect of high-achieving students being more likely to share their scores, possible score inflation in self-reporting, and the concentration of submissions from competitive programs that naturally attract higher-scoring applicants. Such discrepancies highlight why anonymously submitted data should be treated as anecdotal rather than statistically representative, serving more as a source of trends and patterns rather than definitive benchmarks for admission standards or applicant profiles.