**Purpose of Study**

In the past 20 years, mounting pressure has induced many federal and state governments to introduce legislation and programming that reassesses how education is administered and proposes new approaches to enhancing the quality of the educational experience for all children. This quest for radical change has given rise to an era of educational reform, and two signature policy initiatives have been front and center of the debate: school choice, and school vouchers. Briefly stated, school choice policy publicly subsidizes the movement of students from their traditional public school district into alternative schools chosen by their parents, while school vouchers are a means by which this transfer of funds and enrollments is accomplished. In this new marketplace, private and parochial schools that previously filled familiar niches alongside the public school system have been gifted with a policy that expands the pool of students they could potentially enroll. In other words, school vouchers present private and parochial schools with an opportunity capture students from other schools, particularly public schools. In order to benefit from this opportunity, schools must successfully reach and appeal to parents and students who would not previously have considered them an option. Catholic schools have been intriguingly successful at riding the school choice wave and growing their enrollments during the era of school vouchers. To better understand this pattern of success, this thesis takes a deep dive into the marketing materials of a regional system of Catholic schools, guided by the question: *How are Catholic schools envisioning, presenting, and marketing themselves in the era of school choice?*

**Background**

The school choice movement is based on the philosophical belief that parents and children deserve the right to seek out a quality education by any means possible, be it their local neighborhood school or some other alternative form of educational setting. “The whole point of a thoroughgoing system of choice is to free the schools from these disabling constraints by sweeping away the old institutions and replacing them with new ones” (Chubb & Moe, 1990, p. 217). Many education reformers and school voucher supporters have lauded the programs as an educational boon for people of color, encouraging these ethnic groups to support vouchers as a potential stepping stone for their children to a better education and a better life. However, research to support these claims has been slow to materialize, as “data on school choice programs—especially those involving vouchers or other types of scholarships—are still scarce. There have been only a handful of full-scale voucher interventions” (Cowen, 2008, p. 313).

The voucher movement was born largely out of the philosophical principles espoused by economist and famed Nobel laureate Milton Friedman. In 1955, Friedman developed a theoretical concept of using the same free market/capital market principles that have been the cornerstone of American business to improve the way the United States public school systems operated. At that point in history, as is still done today, traditional public schools were largely funded by state and local taxes (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Indiana Department of Education, n.d.; US Department of Education, 2018). A child was assigned to their primary or elementary school based on the area or community where the student lived. Friedman felt that this process or principle of determining where, how and with whom children would be educated was unfair and limited the opportunities that lower income parents and children had to receive a quality education. Friedman stated that “It is only the tyranny of the status quo that leads us to take it for granted that in schooling, government monopoly is the best way...” (Friedman, 1962, p. 96).

Friedman also believed that in a democratic society, families should be allotted more choices or opportunities to shop for educational options for their children above and beyond what existed in the locality within which the family resided. Furthermore, he hypothesized that by distributing vouchers (or tax supported scholarships) to the families of students equal to the tuition that he/she would receive at his/her local public school, a student’s family could better choose (or “shop”) from which group of schools their child should attend. This would allow the family to access the best education and educational services that would enhance their child’s potential for academic and career success long term. Friedman wrote;

Our goal is to have a system in which every family in the U.S. will be able to choose for itself the school to which its children go. We are far from the ultimate result. If we had that – a system of free choice – we would also have a system of competition, innovation, which would change the character of education. (Friedman, 2003, p. x)

As a by-product of this increased competition, Friedman contended that the entire public educational system would be forced to get better, thus benefiting all students, those with vouchers and those residual students who were unable to secure a voucher and were thereby left behind at the neighborhood school. The interjection of competition would introduce flexibility and promote variety in school systems, by making them responsive to market forces (Friedman, 1955; Friedman, 1962). As expressed by Belfield and Levin: “[b]y providing competition, the quality of schooling will rise” (2005a, p. 31). In order to maintain the students that they had, all schools would have to compete like companies in capital markets do to maintain their share of the market or to grow their revenue streams (student populations) and the dollars allocated for each child.

As Friedman continued to push his market-based concept of education in the 60s and 70s, it began to make significant inroads with the mainstream public, most notably parents and lawmakers. It was this philosophy of market-based and deregulated policies that caught the eye of many conservatives in the late 1970s and early 80s, especially that of California Governor, Ronald Reagan, and began the political push toward further exploration of school choice programs (Belfield & Levin, 2005a;Chubb & Moe, 1990; Moe, 2001). Advocates and policymakers have posited that “under the right circumstances… choice could significantly contribute to the fight for social equity. Vouchers are (were) a far more radical reform…” (Moe, 2001, p. 21). Today, Friedman’s capital markets approach to education means that the tax money supporting education follows the child, with each school voucher in Indiana being worth approximately $5,000 per child. Indiana currently has the largest and fastest growing scholarship (voucher) program in the United States. It has grown from roughly 4,000 vouchers for 2012–2013 school year to approximately 36,707 for the 2019–2020 school year, an increase of +850% (Indiana Department of Education, 2020). With the expansion of school choice and voucher programs, parents and students now have the opportunity to expand their educational opportunities beyond just their neighborhood or district schools when considering the best learning environments for them.

At the same time, Catholic school enrollment has been steadily declining since the mid-20th century, and many Catholic schools are facing dire fiscal challenges (National Catholic Education Association Report, 2003; National Catholic Education Association Report, 2020). Catholic schools often receive partial financial assistance from the home parish or the diocese for each Catholic student enrolled, to help offset the costs associated with educating that child. However, non-Catholic student families pay full tuition. On many occasions, the money received from the home parish and from tuition are not enough to offset the total cost of operating schools, forcing many Catholic schools to cut programming, seek out additional fundraising and sponsorship opportunities, or work under a deficit model (National Catholic Education Association Report, 2003, 2020). To address declining enrollments, some Catholic schools have converted to charter schools, and others have begun to accept vouchers (National Catholic Education Association, 2003, 2020). In Indiana, 173 Catholic schools accepted vouchers in 2019/2020 academic year, for a total of $91.3 million in incremental funding (Indiana Department of Education, n.d.).

**Problem Statement**

With school choice and voucher programs, parents and students now have the opportunity to expand their educational opportunities beyond just their neighborhood. Catholic school enrollment has been steadily declining since the mid-20th century. To date, there has been minimal research dedicated to understanding and analyzing what Catholic high schools are doing to market their schools to non-Catholic, public school and voucher-eligible families. In their research of School Choice and Catholic Branding, Trivitt and Wolf (2011) posit that in the current market for K–12 education, “only Catholic schools enjoy a well-known brand identity… that urban Catholic schools are a known quantity” (p. 204). However, there are minimal academic or scientific research studies that can confirm or refute this theory.

**Research Questions**

The present study is a detailed content analysis of school marketing initiatives at all11 Catholic high schools in in the Archdiocese of Indianapolis, seeking to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the current marketing plans and elements that Catholic high schools in Indianapolis/central Indiana use to raise awareness among student families who are eligible for school vouchers?
2. What themes, visuals, activities and types of content are Catholic high schools leveraging in their school marketing initiatives to drive increased brand awareness, student enrollment and student retention?

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework applied to the study will be strategic marketing and advertising, largely based on the work of famed scholar and marketer, Philip Kotler. Kotler has argued that marketing is an essential part of economics and that demand is influenced not only by price, but also by advertising, promotions, sales forces, direct mail, intermediaries and distribution channels. According to Kotler (2003), the organization’s marketing task is “to determine the needs, wants and interests of target markets and to achieve the desired results more effectively and efficiently than competitors in a way that preserves or enhances the consumer’s or society’s well-being” (p. 4).

The expansion of school choice programs in Indiana have enhanced competition for students, by making private schools a viable options for many traditional public school students who would otherwise not be able to afford to attend a private school. This increase in competition has increased the need for all schools, especially financially struggling Catholic schools, to invest in the marketing of their schools to potential customers. Previous research on how parents choose schools shows that their consumer behavior is imperfect, that they often use various shortcuts, and that they make decisions with less than perfect information (Li et al., 2019; Posey-Maddox et al., 2014; Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2009). This forces consumers to rely on brand reputation, where the associations with the brand are assumed to convey information about the brand’s attributes and quality (Belch & Belch, 2017; Stigler, 1961). For successful firms, and firms that are good at marketing themselves to consumer targets, they may intentionally cultivate a brand identity that conveys through their marketing strategy, features that their consumers desire. As Kotler (2003) describes, “Only firms that consistently deliver on those promises will develop a sustained brand identity” (p. 420).

As the number of education options for student families has increased, there is now the need for schools to be more strategic in their approach to marketing. Foskett (2012) argues that “all aspects of an organization’s vision and strategy are linked to market analysis” (p. 248). Consumers make countless decisions every day and are confronted with an overwhelming amount of information input (Mick et al., 2004). Brands are the most common rule of thumb in the contemporary marketplace. They facilitate many purchase decisions and offer reassurance as they connect current and future decisions to experiences, satisfactions, and knowledge (Belch & Belch, 2017; Kapferer, 2012; Keller, 2012; Mooradian et al., 2012). Foskett (2012) explains, “What is clear is that increasing demand is not simply about selling education... it requires a wide range of strategies which take education to potential new participants, tailoring programs and systems to meet their needs” (p. 253). Strategic marketing skills have thus become essential to the practice of education administration.

**Significance**

The Catholic educational system is under duress. Since the baby boom of the 1960s, Catholic school enrollment for grades K–12 has decreased by nearly 60%, falling from 5.2 million students to just over 2 million in 2017 (Hunt, 2005; Meyer, 2007). The decrease in student enrollment has resulted in the closing of nearly 1,500 Catholic Schools in the last decade (National Catholic Education Association Report, 2020). With mounting financial pressures associated with running schools, and intense competition, the Catholic school system has recognized a need to market itself in an effort to recruit new student families and to retain its existing students (National Catholic Education Association Report, 2020).

Another threat to Catholic schools has been the recent introduction of educational reform initiatives. In Indiana, these reforms have centered upon the introduction and expansion of school choice programs. A key component of Indiana's School choice program are school vouchers. With the school voucher program in effect, educational funding dollars now follow the individual child. School choice and the expanding list of educational options that exist for student families has resulted in K–12 schools openly and aggressively competing for students and their dollars. The goal for schools and districts is simple, to increase their pool of funds. Marketing and branding is a key component in many of their efforts.

The findings from this study will be useful for Catholic school leaders and policymakers by providing them with insights on the effectiveness of their existing marketing (or messaging) plans. For those Catholic schools that have not yet enacted marketing plans, the study may help identify current best approaches. This study may also help other school leaders and policymakers to proactively design measurement and evaluation tools that help them market effectively to voucher-eligible families. Further, this study will help researchers and policymakers by contributing to the literature on school marketing, Catholic school marketing, and marketing to voucher-eligible families. Finally, this study provides a constructive application of marketing and business expertise in the realm of educational administration.

**Research assistant needs/tasks**

I need to analyze the images and visuals on 11 websites for the Archdiocese of Indidnapolis. Using AI tools to help me do this.

**1. Demographics**

* **Ethnic and Racial Diversity**:  
  Analyze whether the image includes individuals from a range of ethnic and racial backgrounds. Does the image promote inclusivity, or does it perpetuate stereotypes or biases?
  + How many pictures have American minorities (defined as Black/African American, Brown/Hispanic or Latino, or Native Americans/Indigenous)? What is the total number of American minorities in pictures/images?
  + How many pictures have international minorities (defined as South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, etc.), East Asia (China, Japan, Korea), and Southeast Asia (Thailand, Vietnam, etc.)? What is the total number of International minorities in pictures/images?
  + How many pictures are of White/European Americans? What is the total number of American minorities in pictures/images?
  + Are the racial groups balanced, or do the images skew toward one group (most notably White/European Americans)?
* **Gender Representation**:  
  Examine how genders are depicted. Are there any stereotypes present? Is there an equal or equitable representation of men, women, and non-binary individuals?
* **Ability and Disability**:  
  Assess whether people with disabilities are represented and how they are portrayed. Are they included in meaningful ways or depicted stereotypically?

1. **Catholic Religious Iconography**

First we need to count the number of religious items in the following key areas.

* **Symbols and Objects**:  
  Identify religious symbols (e.g., crosses, etc…) in the image. Are these elements presented respectfully and in the correct cultural context?
* **Religious Dress**:  
  Inclusion of traditional religious attire like uniform, priest attire, etc…. Are these represented authentically, and are they appropriate to the culture being depicted?
* **Rituals or Practices**:  
  If the image depicts a religious ritual (e.g., mass, prayer, festivals, or ceremonies)?
* **Sacred Spaces**:  
  Look at depictions of sacred sites like churches, etc... Are these places shown?

Here is more detailed about those items>

**Catholic Religious Iconography**

1. **Sacred Symbols**
   * **Cross and Crucifix**:  
     Evaluate the depiction of the cross or crucifix, which is central to Catholic identity. Is it presented respectfully, and does it convey the significance of Christ’s sacrifice? How is the crucifix positioned (e.g., in the background, worn by individuals, or part of a larger scene)?
   * **The Virgin Mary**:  
     Examine depictions of the Virgin Mary, often shown with specific iconography (e.g., wearing blue robes, a halo, or holding the infant Jesus). How is Mary portrayed—either in a humble, maternal way or as a divine figure—and what does it communicate about Catholic devotion and reverence for her?
   * **Saints and Their Attributes**:  
     Consider how specific saints are depicted in the image (e.g., St. Peter holding keys, St. Francis with animals, St. Teresa with a heart or a prayer). Do these images reflect their traditional symbols and roles in Catholicism?
2. **Sacred Spaces**
   * **Church Interiors and Architecture**:  
     Look at depictions of Catholic churches, chapels, or cathedrals. Are these sacred spaces shown with their characteristic features, such as altars, stained glass windows, confessionals, or statues of saints? How do these elements help convey the sacredness of the space?
   * **Altar and Eucharist**:  
     Focus on depictions of the altar and the Eucharist (Holy Communion). Are the elements of the Eucharist (bread, wine, chalice) shown in a way that reflects the Catholic understanding of the sacrament? Is there reverence in how the altar and sacramental elements are portrayed?
3. **Rituals and Practices**
   * **The Mass and Liturgy**:  
     Examine images of Mass or Catholic liturgical ceremonies (e.g., priests in vestments, the offering of the Eucharist). Is the ritual depicted accurately, with proper attire, reverence, and a sense of the sacred tradition?
   * **The Rosary**:  
     The rosary, a key Catholic devotional practice, may be depicted through images of prayer beads or people praying. Are these elements shown with the reverence they deserve? Does the image capture the meditative or spiritual aspects of the practice?
4. **Devotional Art**
   * **Icons and Statues**:  
     Catholic iconography often includes statues or images of Jesus, Mary, or saints, particularly in prayerful or miraculous depictions. Assess how these images are portrayed—are they reverential, or do they feel overly commercialized or trivialized?
   * **Angels and Divine Figures**:  
     Angels, particularly Archangels like Gabriel or Michael, are frequently part of Catholic religious imagery. Are these figures depicted as messengers or protectors in a respectful, traditional way? How are divine or heavenly figures such as Christ, the Holy Spirit (often symbolized as a dove), or angels portrayed?
5. **Holy Days and Celebrations**
   * **Depictions of Catholic Holidays**:  
     Focus on Catholic holy days like Easter, Christmas, or the Feast of the Assumption. How are these celebrations depicted? Are the liturgical aspects (e.g., the Stations of the Cross for Good Friday or the Nativity for Christmas) represented with accuracy and reverence?

Here are the websites we would need to evaluate: **Archdiocese of Indianapolis, High Schools**

Bishop Chatard High School, Indianapolis (9-12)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Direct School Website: | <http://www.bishopchatard.org/> |

Cardinal Ritter High School, Indianapolis (7-12)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Direct School Website: | [http://www.cardinalritter.org](http://www.cardinalritter.org/) |

Cathedral High School, Indianapolis (9-12)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Direct School Website: | <https://www.gocathedral.com/index.cfm> |

Fr. Thomas Scecina Memorial High School, Indianapolis (9-12)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Direct School Website: | [http://www.scecina.org](http://www.scecina.org/) |

Providence Cristo Rey High School, Indianapolis (9-12)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Direct School Website: | <http://www.pcrhs.org/> |

Roncalli High School, Indianapolis (9-12)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Direct School Website: | <http://www.roncalli.org/> |

Lumen Christi Catholic School, Indianapolis (PreK-12)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Direct School Website: | <http://www.lumenchristischool.org/#home> |

Oldenburg Academy, Oldenburg (9-12)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Direct School Website: | <http://www.oldenburgacademy.org/> |

Fr. Michael Shawe Memorial High School, Madison (7-12)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Direct School Website: | [http://www.popeace.org](http://www.popeace.org/) |

Our Lady of Providence High School, Clarksville (7-12)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Direct School Website: | <http://www.providencehigh.net/> |

Seton High School, Richmond (7-12)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Direct School Website: | <http://www.setonschools.org/> |