The Effectiveness of Website Design in Higher Education Recruitment

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By

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Abstract:

This paper explores the effectiveness of visual elements and aesthetics in university websites for recruiting prospective students. College and university websites are the gateway to an educational institution and the public face for both academics and athletics. According to Ruffalo Noel Levitz's study on consumer behavior (Levitz, 2014), websites play an important role in providing information for prospective students (both new and transfer), current students, parents, and alumni. Universities' recruiters constantly strive to maximize the utility and depth of information on their websites while offering pleasing and powerful aesthetics to attract potential students and donors. Entirely qualitative in content, this study examines the role of aesthetics in the three key categories: web design, website functionality, and universities' online recruitment strategies. The website functionality key category divides further into subcategories including website usability, accessibility and credibility.

Keywords: web design, aesthetics, website functionality, higher education recruitment, prospective students, accessibility, credibility, usability

The Effectiveness of Website Design in Higher Education Recruitment

College and university websites are the gateway to an educational institution and the public face for both academics and athletics. According to Ruffalo Noel Levitz's study on consumer behavior (Levitz, 2014), websites play an important role in providing information for prospective students (both new and transfer), current students, parents, and alumni. Universities' recruiters constantly strive to maximize the utility and depth of information on their websites while offering pleasing and powerful aesthetics to attract potential students and donors.

Some universities have excellent websites, which have already incorporated modern design styles featuring large photographic banners while improving information access with a user-friendly navigation system (Gaines, 2013). The University of Chicago provides an excellent example of an institution, which pays attention to both enhancement of visual elements (including high-resolution photography) and user-friendly site navigation for optimum functionality. Using high-resolution photography on home page banners is known to generate interest and captivate the visitor. Photographs are excellent visual aids when they are large enough to be seen easily (Stephen, 2009). According to Willis (1999), using enhanced visual elements in web presentation provides for a more memorable, immediately understandable message and improves clarity.

Students appear to trust a professionally designed website more and find it more credible for accessing information (Youngblood, 2013). The credibility of a website affects a user's interest in the site's content and, consequently, users tend to spend longer sessions on the site and access more information. Aesthetics and the use of enhanced visual elements (i.e. color, graphics, texture, text formatting, lines, icons) increases the credibility of a website. "Recent studies have shown that judgments on website credibility are 75% based on a website's overall aesthetics" (Alsudani & Casey, 2009, p. 1). This effect is made truly significant when observing that web users tend to value the professional appeal of a website when deciding which site to select for the same information and services. According to Fogg, Soohoo, Danielson, Marable, Standord, & Tauber (2003), people have reported that professionally designed websites win credibility points.

Universities have started to create marketing and communication strategies which directly involve the website content and especially the redesign of their home page (Halvorsen, 2014). These strategies help convey

various rhetorical messages for visitors. Both the textual treatment and graphic design/photography by designers play large roles in creating a site that gains aesthetic interest and continues to provide better information to the targeted audience.

As most public higher education institutes including, Southern Utah University, generally continue to get budget cut from federal and state funding, marketing and admissions departments feel tremendous pressure to increase enrollment, often with limited resources. In the past five years, freshman enrollment at Southern Utah University has suffered a decline, which resulted in cuts in state funding that was directly related to the university's growth by number. At the source, in this case, lies the prospective student population, which can help the institution decide on effective recruiting methods in order to make better use of their budget and human resources.

The purpose of this study is to explore the effectiveness of visual elements and aesthetics in university websites for recruiting prospective students.

Literature Review

Visual Communication

We communicate visually all the time; we do not have to visit an art gallery or read an art/design book to experience visual communication. "We use visual communication to navigate and understand the world" (Tam, 2008, P. 1). According to Matusitz (2005), most of us may already know that basic elements work together to form the principles of all visual communication. These basic elements include but are not limited to line, shape, color, volume, texture, tone and proportion. "Visual communication has been used since the birth of human civilization: to reveal the mystic, to illustrate the complicated, to explain the complex, and to shed light on the dark" (Matusitz, 2005, p. 2). The intention here is not to prove visual communication is more important than language. The argument is to clarify that visual communication is equally essential as any other forms of communication.

We are all visual learners, in a sense; studies show that people learn and remember more accurately when information is presented to them visually. "Recent research supports the idea that visual communication can be more powerful than verbal communication, suggesting in many instances that people learn and retain information that is presented to them visually much better than that which is only provided verbally" (The power of visual

communication, 2004, P. 2). While using visual communication through mainstream and trade media is important in a high-quality public relations program, there are more efficient ways to reach your target audience.

Public relations work has changed as a result of people using easily accessible online resources and platforms for visual communication. "The Internet has made public relations public again, after years of almost exclusive focus on media. Blogs, online video, news releases, and other forms of web content let organizations communicate directly with buyers" (Scott, 2013, p. 21). Communicating visually online has become relatively easy and popular with the growth of technology. Numerous tools and services are now available on the Web to business owners for promoting their brands and attracting customers. "The use of Internet technology has turned business users into active participants that can use words and images to communicate with customers and make their brands more visible to the world" (Rojas, n.d., para. 2). Marketers should be aware of the proper use of visual aids available online. For example, an interactive visual map needs to have properly sized and accurately relevant images to avoid misleading the user.

Visual communication has played an important role in evolving universities and colleges into what they are today and to plan for a better future. "The major claim of visual communication is one influence of our technological culture. Books are out of date while hypertext is trendsetting and in vogue. Students do not go from one page to the next anymore. Rather, they navigate on the Internet and go through hyperlinks" (Matusitz, 2005, p. 4). Today, students navigate on the Internet and use hyperlinks for getting information. Not only the form of communication need to be faster, but also the structure of presentation needs to be different to challenge the current body of students.

Recruiting Prospective Students in Higher Education Institutions

High school students, undeniably, are already using the Web in the college selection process. With 79 % of high school students using the Internet for playing games, staying in touch with friends through social media, and completing assignments (Richter, 2008), researchers are finding that the Internet is also becoming a powerful resource in the college selection process. Strauss (1998) studied the use of the Web in the college selection process of students who were admitted at Ohio State University and found that the majority of students had access to and also utilized the Web somehow during their college search process. "Admissions marketing has

become a competitive venture. Admissions offices have the constant challenge of developing new and creative information sources to market the institution to the student consumer because information source strategies quickly become dated and unappealing" (Strauss, 1998, p. 25). The focus of admissions professionals should be on a simple way to communicate the college benefits like financial aid to the most appropriate audiences for effective recruitment. Online communication is relatively an easy way to send the message to the majority of potential students.

Current and prospective students are looking for easy-to-find information and anything else is simply annoying. The results from Poock (2006) suggest that information on the homepage should be easy to follow and organized in one place that doesn't require unnecessary scrolling. "Homepages that do require scrolling down either have too much information or are not well organized " (Poock, 2006, para. 11). Designers should be well aware of structuring a layout that does not need much scrolling and effort by the user in order to find the information they need.

Online education in higher education institutions is rapidly growing throughout the United States. Online student enrollment has been growing at a rate that exceeds that of the total higher education student population. "The 17 percent growth rate for online enrollments far exceeds the 1.2 percent growth of the overall higher education student population" (Allen & Seaman, 2010, p. 5). Studies show that the demand for both face-to-face and online courses in higher education institutions (Allen & Seaman, 2010) is growing. In all cases, the demand for online offerings is greater than that of the equivalent face-to-face offerings. Universities and colleges need to prepare for this growth by utilizing their websites and online services in a way that effectively surpasses the demand.

The importance of using the Internet for marketing and promotional purposes by universities and colleges becomes more and more apparent as technology moves forward in a rapid pace. As universities are targeting potential students through the use of technology and the Web, high school students are also searching the Web for the right college, as they are getting closer to graduation. "Much of the research on the use of the Web for marketing purposes has focused on the business sector. However, there is clearly a benefit to colleges and universities in understanding the fundamentals of an effective promotional web design" (Poock& Lefond,

2001, p. 2). Despite a clear need for colleges and universities to understand how prospective students use the Web for accessing information and navigating through sites, the literature indicates that limited data exists in this area.

Designing for the Web

Web designers communicate visually online and are keenly aware of the effects of graphic design elements. Designers require extensive knowledge of graphic effects and visual symbols so that their communication is more intentional and less random. Visual effects play an important role in the communication of content, in addition to creating an appealing experience. "Visual communication is a reality as soon as a word is typed, a color chosen, or a text displayed on the screen, and any visual expression, whether it is intentional or not, communicates something to the visitor of the site" (Thorlacius, 2007, p. 1). Elements of design like color and typography will have different effects on the viewer based on how and where they are used. For example, choosing a hand written font for the title of a web page will add a more personal touch to it compared to using a general typeface like Verdana.

There are some informational websites, like Google, that pay more attention to functionality than aesthetics. As Thorlacius (2007) mentions in his article, this is typically the case where the primary focus is to provide information for users. "The term functionality in this context covers the user friendly aspects of interfaces and Human Computer Interaction (HCI), where the main objective is to create effective websites where the user quickly and efficiently can obtain the desired pieces of information without being delayed by long downloading times or blind alleys when navigating on the site" (Thorlacius, 2007, p. 2). He also argues that aesthetics and functionality should work together in order to create an effective website. Paying attention to the crucial role of aesthetic effects in web design helps the functionality of the site tremendously.

The functionality of a website is defined by usability, accessibility and credibility of the site. Research shows that educators in the area of web design are trying to teach students the importance of web usability and accessibility as well as aesthetics. "Faculty need to balance teaching students the basic building blocks, such as HTML and CSS, with teaching students visual design and design best practices, particularly usability and accessibility" (Youngblood, 2013, p. 2). A website is fully functional when it is easy to find information by all

users including users with disabilities and it is more credible and trustworthy when it is professionally designed with accurate information.

Usability, or user-friendliness, is crucial. If information is hard to find, users will leave the site immediately (Youngblood, 2013). In addition, poor usability has been proven to damage a site's overall credibility, which results in the loss of user trust on that website's content. As Youngblood (2013) points out usability is about the development process that focuses on making an interface easier to use. Creating a user-friendly navigation system and organizing the information into a meaningful hierarchy are important components of designing an easy-to-use website. "Typically, category summaries help identify how participants are thinking about the information and what category names might be used in a navigation system, something that is particularly helpful when working with dropdown menus" (Youngblood, 2013, p. 16). The best way to create a hierarchy in design is by categorizing the information based on the content priorities.

Accessibility, at its core, involves ease of use of a site by users with disabilities including vision, hearing, cognition, and motor skill impairments. A website should be easily and equally accessible for users with disabilities. When a website lacks these considerations in its design, it becomes difficult to use and thus undesirable for this population of web users (Youngblood, 2013). "The power of the Web is in its universality. Access by everyone is an essential aspect" (W3C, 1997). The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) announced the launch of the International Program Office (IPO) for the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) to promote and achieve web functionality for people with disabilities.

Visual design has a direct impact on the credibility of a site regardless of the quality of the site's content. To design a highly credible website, a designer should pay careful attention to the look of a site. According to Fogg, Soohoo, Danielson, Marable, Standord, & Tauber, (2003), almost 50% of comments about web credibility included something about the design look of the site, either in general ("looks professional") or in specifics (the layout, the colors, and so on). "Experiments have shown that users can judge a website's credibility in as little as 3.42 seconds merely on the basis of its aesthetic appeal" (Alsudani & Casey, 2009, p. 1). Visual elements and aesthetics used in web design have an important role in first impressions of credibility.

Based on the findings in literature and a lack of sufficient research in the effectiveness of visual elements

in attracting prospective students through university websites, this study will explore the following question:

RQ-What is the role of aesthetics in designing a recruitment website for higher education institutions?

Methods

Grounded theory will be used since there is no existing theory with an adequate framework for exploring the role of aesthetics in the following three key categories resulting from literature review: web design, website functionality, and universities' online recruitment strategies. The website functionality key category divides further into subcategories including website usability, accessibility and credibility. University of Chicago and Southern Utah University websites will be used as examples for comparison and in-depth analysis. University of Chicago was ranked second out of thirty universities and won two high-profile Webby awards: " In May 2013 the site was honored with two high-profile Webby Awards, winning in the overall School/University Webby Award category as well as picking up the Webby People's Voice Award" (The 30 Best Designed U.S. College Websites, 2014). The Webby award is the leading international award honoring excellence on the Internet in five major media types: Websites, Advertising & Media, Online Film & Video, Mobile Sites & Apps, and Social. According to the New York Times, the Webby award is the Internet's highest honor (20 Years of Honoring Excellence on the Internet, 2016). The newly redesigned University of Chicago's website combines high-quality visuals, a clean layout, a well-organized navigation system and easily accessible information. Southern Utah University's website was recently redesigned in order to attract and bring focus to prospective students for recruiting purposes. The new website has a very different look and feel compared to its predecessor, and the results from analytics collected by the web development team at Southern Utah University indicate vast improvement in site traffic compared to the older version. According to Jill Whitaker, director of web services at southern Utah University, the re-design of the SUU's web site was successful resulting in much better site functionality and lower bounce rate (Whitaker, personal communication, April 12, 2016).

 The role of aesthetics in visual communication will be explored through the theory of visual rhetoric at the end of analysis section.

Grounded theory is a method used in qualitative research that helps the researcher to put together a framework that derives itself from data gathered throughout the study. **"**Theory derived from data is more likely

to resemble the "reality " than is theory derived by putting together a series of concepts based on experience or solely through speculation how one thinks things ought to work" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12). According to Stein (2008), grounded theory is often used when there is no formal theory for explaining a specific dialog. I use grounded theory here as a method for data analysis in the absence of a sufficient framework to explain the role of aesthetics in designing a university recruiting website. Researchers use this method in order to explain their findings in a more meaningful way to the reader. "Grounded theories, because they are drawn from data, are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12).

I will also examine the ways that design communicates certain messages and meanings rhetorically to persuade the audience through the theory of visual rhetoric. The simplest definition of visual rhetoric is how or why visual images communicate meaning. One of the key features in visual rhetoric's perspective on images is an explanation for how culture and meaning are reflected, communicated, and changed by images. "Visual rhetoric is the term used to describe the study of visual imagery within the discipline of rhetoric as a branch of knowledge, rhetoric dates back to classical Greece and is concerned with the study of the use of symbols to communicate; in the most basic sense, rhetoric is an ancient term for what now typically is called communication" (Foss, 2004, p. 1). In a visual rhetoric approach, every color, form, medium and size of an object or product is chosen purposefully for communicative purposes.

Discussion/Analysis

The Role of Aesthetics in Website Design:

A recent trend in web design for both desktop and mobile interfaces is an emphasis on incorporating attractive and eye-catching graphics as background, or as the top banner of a page. It is important to maintain a reasonable balance over the elements of the design so that none of them overpower the message. As Ryan Vannin mentioned in his article, "Trends are what drive our jobs and our profession. But trends, as far as I understand, influence the way we design sites a bit too much, and the right balance between technical possibilities, aesthetics and content richness is what really gives quality to our work" (Vannin, 2011, para. 19). I

believe the University of Chicago has done a tremendous job of keeping the balance between the use of eye-catching imagery, navigation system and the hierarchy of information placement on its homepage (Figure 1).

A large high-resolution photo is used in the top banner, which is very attractive and aesthetically pleasing. They layered two text boxes on the photo to explain it in greater detail. It is important to mention that the contrasting color of each text box is carefully selected so that the information in front of the image can be easily read. At the same time, there is a clear horizontal navigation system at the top of the banner, which helps users find information easily.

Figure 1 - *University of Chicago Home page*

Design for websites requires certain skills for appropriate use of design elements. Colors and fonts play varying roles when used for web content and should be chosen properly. Certain fonts can become nearly illegible on screen and saturated bright colors may irritate the eyes when viewed on a monitor. While incorporating images in a design (Grancea, 2014), it is important to pay attention to the context in which they appear, knowing that it might change the meaning associated with each image. For example, the color scheme

chosen for the university of Chicago homepage, including both the dark maroon color used in the very top banner and the color combination on the boxes (Figure 1), communicates their school color (Figure 2).
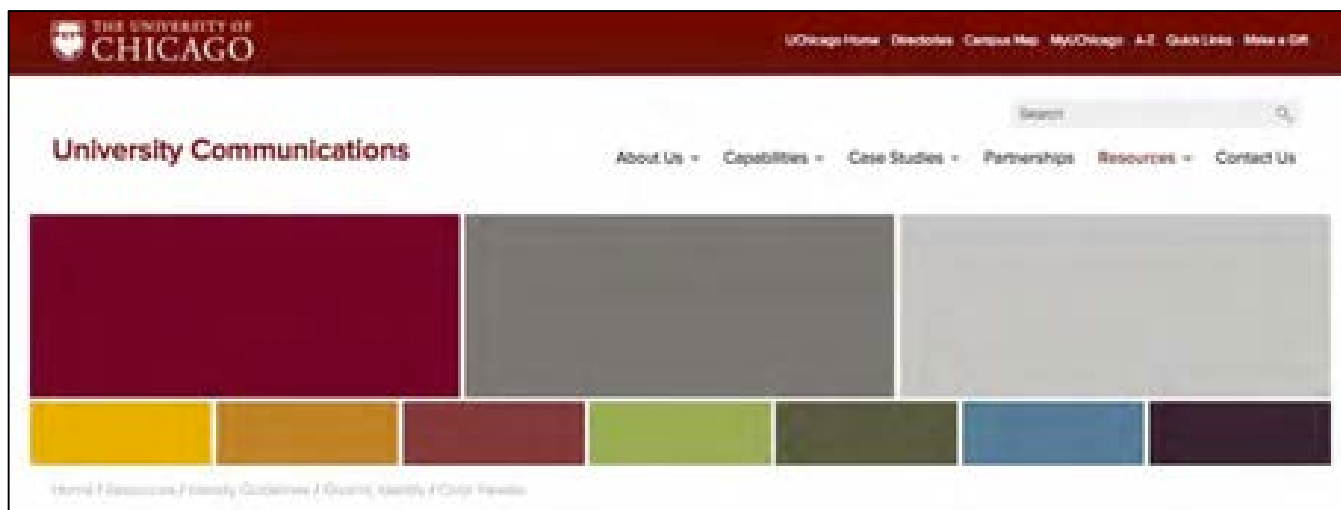
Figure 2- *University of Chicago Color Palette*

Designers always face the challenge of crafting a page's design without cluttering it with too much information or irrelevant visuals. A web designer needs to be very direct, simple and clear in order to accurately convey a message and emphasize this message in a very visually crowded page. One of the skills that assist a web designer in overcoming cluttering issues is to keep the content and information well-organized. "Website hierarchy is a central principle for organizing information in websites with implications for user orientation on the Web" (Djonov, 2007, p. 1). The University of Chicago stands once again as a great example of an effective hierarchy method for organizing the information and content of a page. The title and logo of the university dominate the space through their size and position at the very top. Secondary information such as news is set against a gray-colored background in a smaller font size below the top banner, demonstrating a wise choice of placement, color and font to organize content.

The Role of Aesthetics in Website Functionality:

The functionality of a website boils down to its usability, accessibility and overall credibility. To date there remains an erroneous assumption that this functionality is unaffected by the usage of visual elements and aesthetics in a site's design. "The large amount of visually and graphically ill-considered, rash websites

illustrates that there are still some web designers who operate according to a narrow conception of "functionality" and completely neglect the value of the visual communication in supporting the functionality" (Thorlacius, 2007, p. 2). Quite to the contrary, functionality and aesthetics interweave to create an effective website. According to Thorlacius (2007) in the *Role of Aesthetics in Web design*, graphics are considered an integrated part of web design to support website functionality.

In order to explore the role of aesthetics in the functionality of a website in finer detail, I'll discuss this topic within website functionality subcategories including usability, accessibility and credibility. These three subcategories are interconnected and support one another in practice. When a site is usable – easy to use – it is often, as a result, more accessible for users with disabilities; consequently, users are then also more likely to trust the site's content and treat it as a credible source of information.

Website Usability:

Usability of a website corresponds to how easy it is to find information and navigate the many pages of the site. "Usability, or how easy it is to use a site, is critical because if a site is difficult to use, users will go elsewhere for the information or service. Poor usability has been demonstrated to undermine overall site credibility" (Youngblood, 2013, p. 2). It is a web designer's primary responsibility, for the sake of user retention, to create a design that makes it easy for users to find information through a clean and simple navigation system and well-organized content. University of Chicago's website clearly showcases how clever design facilitates ease of use. The clean, elegant and straightforward navigation system of the site empowers a visitor to rapidly and directly access the desired information (Figure 3). I tested the navigation of the site with a prospective student's mindset by immediately following the Admissions & Aid link. As is demonstrated on the image below, a very clear and precise drop-down menu appeared from the top horizontal navigation bar and provided me a list of choices that were very easy to follow.

Figure 3- *University of Chicago Horizontal Navigation System*

It is worth mentioning that the clean look and design of the navigation system here is absolutely crucial to efficient site navigation. The overall simplicity of the design and clever choice of color eliminate any distraction from the important and relevant content (Figure 1). This is an excellent example of how usability and aesthetics work in unison to synthesize an effective, efficient website. A significant amount of research also indicates that aesthetics and usability are certainly linked to one another (Alsudani & Casey, 2009; Fogg, Soohoo, Danielson, Marable, Standord, & Tauber, 2003; Youngblood, 2013).

Website Accessibility:

As it is defined by (W3C, 2008), website accessibility is the usability of a site for users with disabilities related to vision, hearing, cognition, and motor skills, among others. "When websites are not accessible, disabled users are at a disadvantage in an arena that should serve as an equalizer rather than a barrier" (Youngblood, 2013, p. 2). When designing for accessibility, designers need to create a layout that is adaptable to a variety of disabilities, including those related to vision, hearing, mobility, speech, cognition and learning (W3C, 2008).

Designers should refer to the W3C rules and make sure that their design complies with accessibility standards, especially when designing websites for a governmental organization (universities sites included); otherwise, the organizations may face lawsuits related to lack of access.

Educators in the area of web design often encourage design students to adopt universal design so that a wide variety of audiences can access their content regardless of the technology used (Youngblood, 2013). One example of such a design is the inclusion of alternative text for images as a solution for sighted users when the images themselves are not available as a result of the device being used. In addition, the ALT attributes make sites more accessible when users turn off web images to conserve bandwidth and/or loading speed in areas without broadband and on mobile devices.

A website can be simultaneously accessible and aesthetically pleasing for the user; the two concepts are not necessarily separate. Again the University of Chicago is an outstanding example of such a design, as the screenshot of their style sheet coding demonstrates (figure 4). In this style sheet of their home page, the yellow highlighted **alt** tag, as explained above, is clear evidence of careful consideration toward accessibility rules. The alt tags are used in web design to include information about image so that if users, for any reason, turned the images off or couldn't load or see them, they can easily get a depiction of these images in text format. As you can see in the figure bellow, each *alt tag* is assigned to a certain image and followed with related information.


Figure 4- *University of Chicago CSS Coding*

Website Credibility:

In a study done by Fogg, Soohoo, Danielson, Marable, Standord, & Tauber (2003), 2,684 people evaluated the credibility of two live websites on a similar topic (health). The results show that many participants make judgments about the credibility of websites based on the site's design, including layout, typography, font size, and color scheme. "When evaluating the credibility of a website, participants commented on the design look of the site more often than any other website feature, with 46.1% of the comments addressing the design look in some way" (Fogg, Soohoo, Danielson, Marable, Standord, & Tauber, 2003, p. 5). Additional sources support the link between credibility and usability of a website. "Credibility influences a user's interest in a website. Once users perceive the credibility of a website they will be more likely to use it" (Alsudani & Casey, 2009, p. 1).

The role of aesthetics in the credibility of a website is examined in Alsudani and Casey's study based on user judgment. Participants in this study commented on the overall unity of design for website credibility. Unity in web design can be achieved by a close relationship between harmony, balance, contrast/dominance and color of all the content. "Making 'Unity' in home page design affects users' judgments on web credibility, as home pages that achieve 'Unity' in their design are considered to be more credible than others that lack 'Unity' in their design" (Alsudani & Casey, 2009, p. 6). Users tend to trust the credibility of a website that is designed more professionally in comparison to one that shows no indication of clean and professional design.

A solid example of a credible website which is designed professionally is the University of Chicago. The overall look and feel of the design shows signs of all components of unity based on design principles. The wise choice of complementary colors like red and green, blue and orange in their color scheme is a clear indication of well-formed contrast. There is also a great balance between the use of images and text to create unity throughout the page (Figure 5).
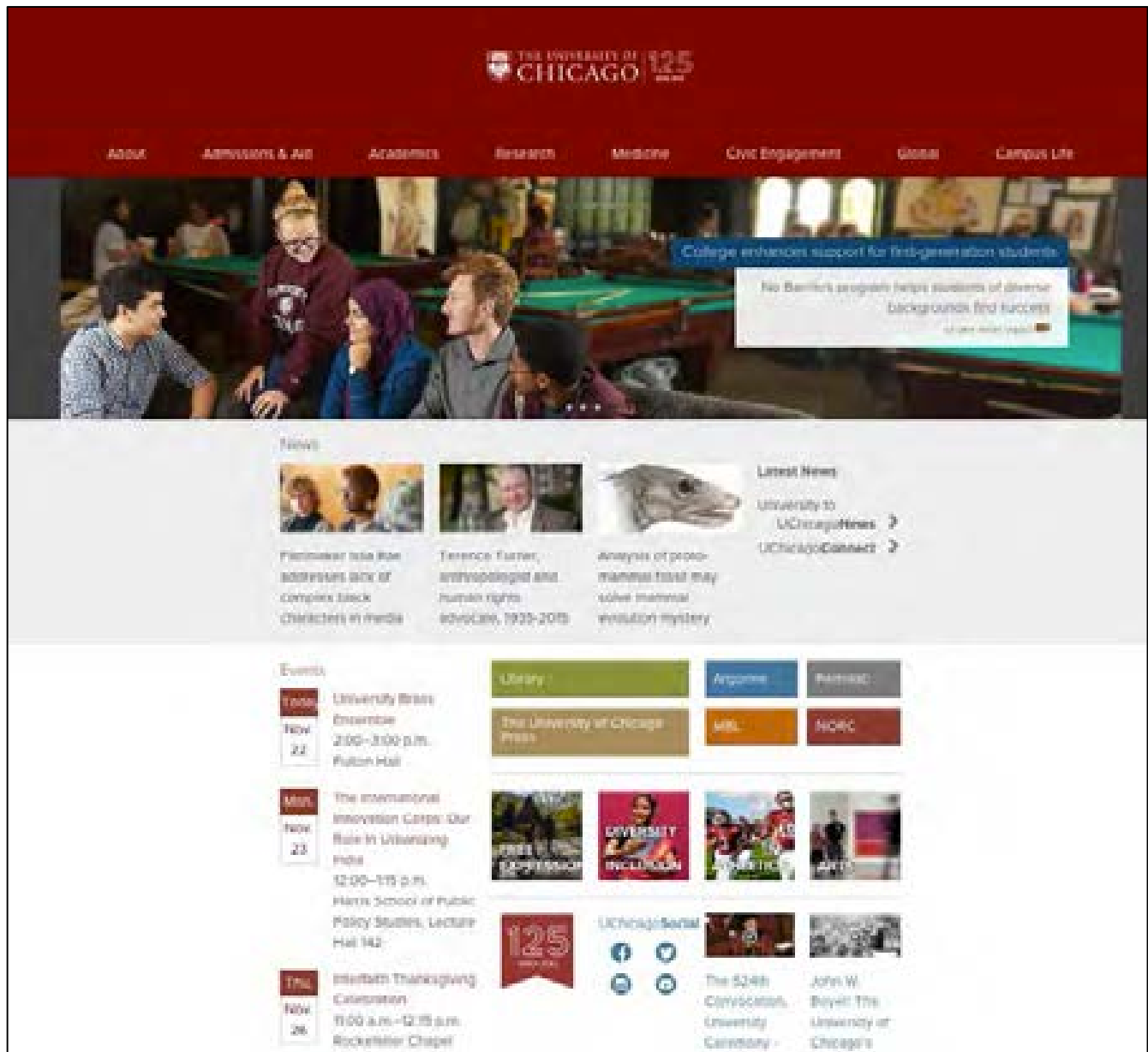
Figure 5- *University of Chicago Overall Feel & Look*

The Role of Aesthetics in Universities' Online Recruitment Strategies:

      Universities usually search for prospective students by developing products like courses, distributing

them by announcements and promoting them by publishing brochures and view books. This concept has been

widely used as an educational tool in both the business and academic fields (Keller, 2012). Some higher

education institutions are still recruiting via traditional methods like sending out letters and brochures or through

phone calls. It is commonly recommended to use a mixed method when recruiting future students. Traditional forms of communication, such as phone calls and printed materials, should be used in combination with technological tools, such as email and social media (Keller, 2012). Poock and Lefond (2001) studied college and high school students and found that almost all of them relied on the Web when applying to colleges or universities.

Clearly the Web plays an integral role in the college choice process for undergraduates. More recently, research on the college choice process of graduate students has produced similar findings to those focusing on undergraduate students. For example, in a series of focus groups and surveys done by Poock (2006), participants suggested that the information on a web page should be visually clear to make reading easy. In the same study, graphics were perceived as an important visual guide for the user so that they knew they were on the university's web pages, although such graphics should not dominate the page.

Knowing how to reach and ultimately connect with prospective students is a primary responsibility of marketing and admissions departments at all institutions of higher education (Keller, 2012). Admissions offices are challenged to evaluate their recruitment practices under the increased use of online communication and social media. The rapid growth of technology and easy access to online resources for many students and parents has dramatically reduced dependence on traditional forms of media, yielding a demand for change in the recruitment process.

College and university websites play a vital role in this process. A university home page is a gateway to information that can regularly assist future/current students and their parents. Meticulous attention to detail in the content arrangement and aesthetics of the home page is therefore crucial (Halvorsen, 2014). It is widely popular in university website creation to use oversized photographic banners and minimalistic design. In fact, most of these home pages are designed specifically for the targeted students and their parents. For example, Southern Utah University's home page has undergone a major redesign in order to make the page more recruitment-oriented with useful information for prospective students. Previous versions were designed with faculty, staff and current students in mind. Information in the older design was organized through two vertical and horizontal

navigation systems, which were crafted for internal use (Figure 6). The overall look and feel of the page wasn't

aesthetically pleasing because of lacking eye catching and large visual elements.
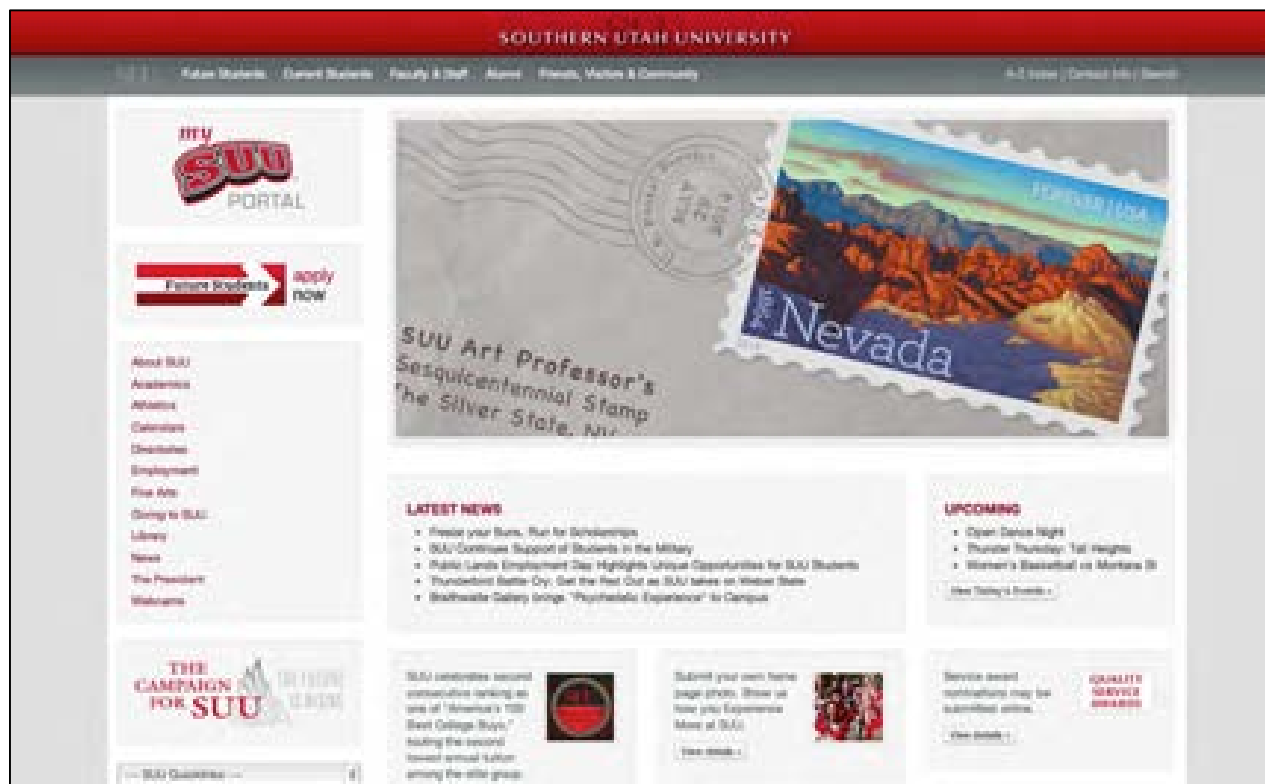
Figure 6- *Southern Utah University-Old Website Design*

The new website, by contrast, has a completely different look and feel with a large, attractive photo/

video placed directly below the main navigation system to attract prospective students. The organization

structure for information strictly uses horizontal navigation, keeping the needs of future students in mind. The

hierarchy of information presentation is also carefully planned to prioritize the prospective student's needs. For

example, the most important links to information that is essential for future students – Apply, Visit, College life,

Majors, Scholarships and Success Stories – are placed at the top of the page using bold font in the main red top

navigation bar. Secondary links to information for the use of faculty and staff (internal use) are organized below

the top bar in a gray color with smaller font size (Figure 7).

Figure 7- *Southern Utah University- New Website Design*

As in the redesign of most websites, changing the look and structure of SUU's homepage involved numerous challenges and limitations. Many faculty and staff complained about the new look and navigation system because the information wasn't presented in the manner to which they had grown accustomed. The recruitment-focused nature of the new design was highly inconvenient for SUU's faculty and staff, especially when compared to the previous design. To overcome this challenge, the web design team chose the solution of adding more information/ links for faculty and staff within the secondary navigation system.

I also had the opportunity to redesign Graduate Studies website within Southern Utah University, as my capstone project required for my master's degree. My extensive research in the web design field helped in transferring the old feel and look of the current site (Appendix A-Figure 8), to a new recruiting focused web site (Appendix B- Figures 9-13).

Various techniques have helped higher education institutions to promote themselves as inspiring places of study. University orientation and "open days" traditionally have helped in this area, but today, thanks to the

Internet, students have a massive database of extra information, updated on a daily basis, at their fingertips. By visiting college websites on their laptop, tablet or mobile device, students can look into courses offered and get a clear sense of what student life is like in different places around the country.

Visual Communication and Rhetorical Reasoning:

As cliché as it has grown over time, there is strong reasoning behind the idiom "A picture is worth a thousand words". We live in a world where almost everything in our environment has a visual impact on us. Whether you are looking for an item in a store, driving around town looking for directions, or just browsing the Web in your favorite social media site, the first things that catch your eyes are colors, shapes and strong visual graphics. Bold colors and in-focus graphics provide a drastically improved visual example over simple textual treatments ("Visual Rhetoric," 2014).

Visual communication and how or why visual images communicate meaning with viewers is better explained through rhetorical reasoning. "Under a theory of visual rhetoric, we would expect the visual viewpoint, focus, graphics, and layout to be related in a specific way to the message itself, rather than to be independent variables, as is often presumed in consumer research" (Scott, 1994, p. 15).

Sonja Foss (2004) mentions that visuals and graphics play important parts in the rhetorical environment around us and ignoring them shows that we don't fully understand the symbols that affect us every day. Understanding the visual elements in our surrounding environment, culturally or physically, reveals what we value and shapes what we do. "Our contemporary period is not unique in being dominated by images; in every historical period, images have been an influential presence in the public sphere. Public images often work in ways that are rhetorical; that is, they function to persuade" (Olson, Finnegan, & Hope, 2003).

A designer can rhetorically shape images appropriate for a certain situation by selecting the right information to represent, using an appropriate style, and applying certain design elements like textures, color, and repetition. "In a given rhetorical situation, for example, a document designer can choose a certain type style and size, arrange text on a page, and insert graphical elements to make the page or screen more accessible to readers, to emphasize information, and to create an inviting tone" (Hill, C. & Helmers, M. 2003, p.215).

Universities are constantly putting forward the effort to visually transform their home pages in order to attract student and encourage them to apply (Halvorsen, 2014). It is important to find the right balance between design elements while designing a website for higher education institutions. This is a fragile undertaking; communicating the right message to the audience can easily go wrong with one simple mistake. To prevent this, careful use of design elements can help ensure that one is conveying the intended message. Color, for example, can send a variety of emotional messages and should be used with great caution by a designer. Using a blue color, which is typically associated with calmness and peace, will inevitably fail when attempting to generate excitement and energy. "Misunderstanding can occur at any stage of the communication process. A potential downside of visual communication involves the use of poorly designed visual aids that are difficult to understand or see. If an irrelevant information is presented, images can also be distracting and impede the understanding of concepts they should be trying to clarify" (What is Communication?, 2014, para. 5).

I believe that the University of Chicago has, through incorporation of the principles above, successfully conveyed its message to its audience. As an example, the color scheme for their website has been intentionally chosen to match the school's official colors. They are also successful in communicating order through organization, simplicity, and consistency of web page content and information. As a user, I could readily understand how they are communicating their message to prospective students through the use of attractive high-resolution photos and a well-organized content navigation system (Figure 1).

Conclusion

In designing for the Web, choosing suitable visuals provides the dual benefit of conveying the right message to the audience as well as creating a strong and emotional connection with viewers. Linda Scott describes in her article, "Rhetoric is an interpretive theory that frames a message as an interested party's attempt to influence an audience. The sender's intention is understood to be manifest in the argument, the evidence, the order of argumentation, and the style of delivery"(Scott, 1994, p. 2). Incorporating interesting, bold and attractive images/photos into a web page attracts and engages viewers and builds a powerful emotional connection with one's audience.

Designers need to keep up with relentlessly growing web technologies and the demand for exceptional, cutting-edge design. Because of a large number of URLs presently existing on the Internet, web designers need to work tirelessly in order to grab attention and stand out among their competition. The first impression of visual appeal seems to be consistent over time (Josephson, Barnes, & Lipton, n.d.). At the same time, designers need to know how to maintain a proper balance between the use of aesthetics and other components involved in web design (like navigation systems) so that they support the functionality of the site. "The aesthetic effects must support the content and the functional aspects. Websites are more user-friendly when they contain aesthetic effects that support the navigation and interaction functions" (Thorlacius, 2007, p. 5).

Strong evidence in research has proven that the functionality of a website is heavily linked with the use of aesthetics. A website is fully functional when the user can easily use the site, find information through a well-organized navigation system and, in result, find the site credible. "Design and aesthetics have a profound impact on how users perceive information, learn, judge credibility and usability, and ultimately assign value to a product. To dismiss design as merely visual is to make a fundamental mistake. Style does not replace substance, but style and substance in balance work much better" (David & Glore, 2010, p. 5).

Using large photographic/video banners has become the new trend in designing for the Web. Many universities are changing their websites under this new and popular design method for recruitment purposes and have already moved away from the traditional approach towards prospective students. According to (Peterson, 2014) there are also some higher education institutions that have gone even a step further and are using the virtual tour as a recruiting tool in place of traditional campus visits. "We've found a way to bring the college campus to life, says Abi Mandelbaum, CEO and co-founder of YouVisit, a leader in virtual campus visits" (Peterson, 2014, para. 4). In addition to recruitment and marketing, universities are working on online education and improving their e-learning environment. One the best ways to keep the e-learning experience at its best is to design online educational websites so that they are clean, easy to use and attractive to students. "At least one aesthetic concern is currently beyond the control of most individual educators or even individual schools or systems: the aesthetic of the e-learning platform. The main criterion for using and choosing e-learning platforms has been usability and tool options. The aesthetic qualities and sensory considerations have been in many cases

absent" (David & Glore, 2010, p. 5). According to David and Glore, results from a survey done by course administrators show that 47% of the participants feel the e-learning platform offers only limited possibility of customization while 82% feel that design and layout are critical for user engagement.

It is important to mention that no matter how visually attractive and eye-catching a university website seems, the overuse of graphics and scattered information can easily confuse potential students and will result in a loss of interest. To attract prospective students and to bolster recruitment efforts, it is therefore necessary to keep the design simple with the appropriate use of images and related information that is well-organized and easy to find, along with a user-friendly navigation system.

Nevertheless, it remains a question and a topic for future research to design effective and aesthetically pleasing online platforms that foster a persuasive and enjoyable e-learning experience for online students.

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Appendix A

Figure 8- *Graduate Studies Current Web site*

Appendix B

Figure 9- *Graduate Studies Home Page - New Design*

Figure 10- *Graduate Studies Current Students Page - New Design*   **Figure 11-** *Graduate Studies Future Students - New Design*

Figure 12- *Graduate Studies Degrees Page - New Design*

Figure 13- *Graduate Studies Contact Page - New Design*