

Exploring Physical Artifacts on the Campus Tour: A Comparison of Institutional Messaging

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Campus tours provide an opportunity for colleges and universities to demonstrate the benefits of attending a particular institution. As a recruitment tool, tours are essential in providing context to students' potential college experiences. Embedded in campus tours are non-verbal messages. One form of these messages are the physical artifacts such as posters in the hallways of academic buildings or furniture in study areas. By thoroughly examining physical artifacts found during the campus tour of an urban, Midwestern institution, this study considers messages conveyed to potential students and the implications of those messages for the university.

Understanding the climate of competition for potential students, university admission offices must strategically market the institution through available resources in order to generate a substantial applicant pool (Padjen, 2002). Higher education has become a business, selling an intangible product to students who are increasingly more consumer savvy (Washburn & Petroschius, 2004). Padjen (2002) notes that "today's students are sophisticated consumers who shop for colleges the way they shop for anything else," and colleges must respond to this demand with services and amenities that match current prospective students' sophisticated palates (p. 19). Simply receiving an education may not be enough to entice today's students to apply and enroll. As such, institutions send a variety of messages to potential students to promote their features and amenities. Administrators argue that the perceived collegiate lifestyle sells the college experience more than the degree itself:

Colleges and universities could be said to be selling a product (a degree) and the services they provide (teaching and learning, social life, goods) are simply accessories designed to enhance the perceived (and real) value of the product. One could argue that the better the quality of service enhancements,

the better the quality of the product itself (Anctil, 2008, pp. 2-3). These "accessories" are the collegiate lifestyle that students may expect to accompany their academic education. While academics encompass the traditional areas of classroom education and study space, the lifestyle component is comprised of student involvement activities, social opportunities, and the residential experience.

Artifacts found on campus tours are important because they contribute to the message students receive about the institution and can include anything from posters on display to furniture in lounges. Kuh and Whitt (1988) define physical artifacts as "those things that surround people physically and provide them with immediate sensory stimuli as they carry out culturally expressive activities" (p. 19). According to Hoover (2009), giving prospective students a successful campus tour, which includes highlighting those physical artifacts, could make the difference for that student when it comes to their decision of where to attend college. Physical attributes form the primary basis for the first impression made by an institution on prospective students (Sturner, 1973; Thelin & Yankovich, 1987). Strange and Banning (2001) state, "It is clear that the campus

physical environment is an important feature that influences students' attraction to and satisfaction with a particular institution" (p.12). Therefore, the campus tour is a pivotal experience for prospective students and a necessity for successful recruitment.

There is a lack of research regarding the physical artifacts and the non-verbal messages that are subsequently sent on campus tours. The current literature merely explains the importance of the campus tour in the decision-making process (Hoover, 2009), but little work has been done to explain universities' intentionality in choosing physical artifacts to highlight on the campus tour. Enrollment management professionals understand how crucial the physical campus environment is in attracting prospective students (Sturner, 1973; Thelin & Yankovich, 1987). However, even those not in enrollment management should consider the role that the campus tour has on prospective students' experience within an institution. When a student enrolls following a campus tour, the institution and those staff members within it have a responsibility to meet expectations set by the tour through the collaborative efforts of all departments.

The purpose of this study is to determine what nonverbal messages are communicated to prospective students from the physical artifacts located in the environment featured on a campus tour. This study also addresses a significant gap in the literature by exploring the following research questions about the campus tour experience:

- What messages are conveyed to campus tour participants through physical artifacts about the collegiate lifestyle culture and academic culture of an institution?
- Which of the two cultural messages are found to be more prominent on

the tour, messages of lifestyle culture or academic culture?

Literature Review

Nonverbal Messages

The ability of a physical environment to communicate has long been agreed upon by various environmental psychologists (Moos, 1986; Porteus, 1977; Rapaport, 1982; Zeisel, 1975). The symbolic aspects of a physical environment allow it to communicate non-verbally. Rapaport (1982) states that the physical environment "communicates, through a whole set of cues, the most appropriate choice to be made: the cues are meant to elicit appropriate emotions, interpretations, behaviors, and transactions by setting up the appropriate situations and contexts" (pp. 80-81). This phenomenon of nonverbal communication has been supported by a number of studies looking at various environments from restaurants to universities (Hansen & Altman, 1976; Sommer, 1978).

The symbolic aspect of the physical environment is further broken down into fixed, semi-fixed, and non-fixed environmental elements (Rapaport, 1982). Fixed elements include physical structures themselves, such as walls, floors and ceilings. Semi-fixed elements can be flexibly arranged within a fixed element and include such things as furniture, pictures, and signs. Non-fixed elements are the people that make up a particular physical environment and are the ever-changing elements of any physical space, such as students studying in a lounge. The study conducted for this article focuses on the fixed and semi-fixed elements in an institution's physical environment because those elements are particularly capable of conveying messages about culture (Rapaport, 1982). Therefore, focusing on the elements

most capable of conveying those messages is essential.

Culture

The framework for analyzing and understanding the content of nonverbal messages and the specific classifications of fixed and semi-fixed elements stem from research on culture. The term *culture* lacks a unified definition (Kuh & Whitt, 1988) due to its use in various disciplines such as anthropology, organizational studies, and education; the term has not one but many definitions depending on its particular context (Kuh, 1993). For this study, a higher education perspective of culture was adopted and thus defined as “the collective, mutually shaping patterns of institutional history, mission, physical settings, norms, traditions, values, practices, beliefs and assumptions which guide the behavior of individuals and groups in an institution of higher education” (Kuh, 1993, p. 2).

For this study, a view of culture as explained by Masland (1985), Schein (1985), and Kuh and Whitt (1988) will be utilized to narrow this concept. Most salient to this research is Masland’s (1985) work on tangible symbols because they are comparable to physical artifacts. In the context of a campus tour, physical artifacts are the very fixed and semi-fixed elements as defined by Rapaport (1982). Besides their functional purposes, physical artifacts are capable of conveying powerful nonverbal messages about campus culture (Hormuth, 1990; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Strange & Banning, 2001). Therefore the physical artifacts that make up an institution’s physical environment, as defined by Banning and Bartels (1997), are the main focus of this study.

Two such messages of interest to this study are messages about the academic

culture of the institution and messages about its collegiate lifestyle (Padjen, 2002; Niles, 2010). Often, institutional mission statements focus predominantly on the goals, impact, and history of academics (Fugazzotto, 2009), and messages regarding academic culture are to be expected while visiting a college or university. Therefore information about the variety of academic programs offered, research opportunities, and the use of technology in classrooms would all be expected on a campus tour. In addition to the academic messages, institutions of higher education are also likely to send messages about campus culture and collegiate lifestyle. Padjen (2002) states, “These days, college isn’t just an education – it’s a lifestyle” (p.19). The necessity of remaining competitive with peer institutions has prompted many colleges and universities to modernize amenities and architecture in order to continue attracting students who expect convenience and cutting edge offerings (Padjen, 2002; Washburn & Petroshius, 2004; Anctil, 2008). Campus tours provide an opportunity for institutions to capitalize on this trend by showcasing the amenities available to prospective students.

The Campus Tour

Boyer (1987) explains that the physical environment experienced on a campus visit has an impact on a student’s likelihood of applying that institution. Hoover (2009) states, “Long known as the ‘golden walk’, the campus visit is a crucial ritual. Research shows that it greatly influences a prospective applicant’s decision to apply to a college – and an accepted student’s decision to enroll” (p.1). As a result, this “golden walk” becomes an extension of a student’s progression through the decision process. Despite the importance of the campus visit, little literature exists on the particular subject, specifically in relation to campus culture. The

nonverbal communication of physical artifacts has been studied in a number of contexts, but rarely in the context of a campus tour where these messages could perhaps have the greatest impact on the crucial function of recruitment.

Research Methods

Site Description

The site studied is a large, public, Midwestern university in an urban setting. Primarily a commuter campus, this metropolitan university is a more recent addition to the city. This particular university places an emphasis on research and has over 100 research centers associated with the campus. At the time of the study, enrollment was estimated at 30,000 students with the institution employing over 2,500 faculty members of whom 90% hold a professional or doctoral degree. Gender composition of the institution was 58% female and 42% male. Over 20% of students were classified as members of an ethnic minority or were international students. The diverse composition of the student body is intentional in an effort to represent the ethnic composition of the surrounding community. Student ambassadors lead the campus tours at the institution. These ambassadors are trained to explain to potential students what the campus has to offer in terms of facilities, services, and experiences. By allowing students to guide campus tours, the institution intends to display not only the campus but also the success and engagement of the students who attend.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection procedure. The researchers observed the environment of the campus tour in its entirety. Tours lasted

approximately 150 minutes, and each research team member was responsible for observing and documenting one complete tour session. This study used naturalistic observation, and each team member acted as a complete participant in the tour. In order to combat bias of human perception, three team members were present for each observational session. While field notes were the most substantial form of data collection, the messages conveyed on the tour were also validated through photographic data collection. Researchers' identities were concealed as an attempt to not disrupt the normal activities of the campus tour (Merriam, 2009).

Data analysis procedure. The researchers collected field notes and photographs to begin the analysis process. Each artifact was thoroughly reviewed by each member of the team. To help narrow the focus due to the large amount of information gathered, researchers utilized a grounded theory approach by creating a coding instrument (see Appendix A) to catalogue and analyze the information. This helped to "develop well-supported argument[s] that add to the understanding of [our] phenomenon" (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002, p. 164). This information from the coding instrument was then used to organize themes and sub-themes. All data collected, including field notes and photographs, were compiled into a master transcript. Triangulation, or the multiple observational approach, enabled the team to use all research strategies to reflect on the physical attributes that would help to answer the research questions (Denzin, 1971). After distributing the data into two categories—*academic culture* and *lifestyle culture*--axial coding began by cross referencing codes and then extracting the most prevalent meta-themes within each category.

Validity and reliability. Two possible threats existed in relation to the validity and reliability of this study: reactivity and researcher bias. Reactivity indicates the potential distortion of observable behavior due to the presence of the researcher (Padgett, 2008). In this study, reactivity was combated through covert observation in which the researchers participated in the tours as members of the group. An additional threat was researcher bias. Although researcher bias is difficult to avoid completely, the researchers took steps to control the influence of their personal biases on the results of this study. First, the researchers utilized triangulation in the collection and interpretation of the data. Second, the researchers ensured inter-observer reliability by requiring every tour to be observed by a minimum of three researchers at the same time.

Findings

The primary research question asked what messages are conveyed through physical artifacts during the campus tour. A secondary question sought to discover which culture (academic or lifestyle) was more heavily represented in the physical artifacts. This study found that physical artifacts conveying messages of lifestyle culture were more salient to the campus tour when compared to the physical artifacts of academic culture. The following sections outline prevalent themes observed while participating in the campus tour. From the themes of lifestyle culture and academic culture, meta-themes and subcategories were defined to further organize the messages conveyed.

Lifestyle Culture

Two meta-themes were evident within lifestyle culture: urban climate and strategic convenience. For the purposes of this study, urban climate was defined as anything that signified student life as unique to the institution and its metropolitan-focus including events, spaces, places, and other visible artifacts. This institution clearly valued the label of “metropolitan campus” emphasizing the relationships and experiences available due to its location within an urban setting.

Urban Climate. Urban climate specifically relates to characteristics that would not be found on a rural or traditional residential college campus. Subcategories that arose within urban climate included integrated technology and beneficial amenities. Researchers’ defined “amenities” as artifacts that are not required to succeed academically but are an enhancement to the academic experience. It must be noted that integrated technology, including the availability of computer stations, webcam stations, and television advertising campus events is not a necessity to the academic experience, but surely enhances it. From the observation of these resources on the campus tour, it was clear that the institution values technology and invests valuable resources into making it a technologically connected campus. Modern architecture was a prevalent subtheme found on the campus tour. An explicit example of the modern architecture exhibited was the new Campus Center. This building was the beginning and end point for the tour, reinforcing the pride of the new, modern construction. The modern building featured multi-leveled windows and accents of school colors throughout its design. This message of urban community continued in the many advertisements on campus for events in the city as well as by the skyline

visible through many campus building windows.

Strategic Convenience. An additional meta-theme was strategic convenience. Strategic convenience was defined by this study as anything that offered simplicity and accessibility for the students of this institution. Many of these artifacts were not necessary for the academic mission of the institution but offered additional benefits to students and staff of the institution. Even regarding the commute around the campus, above-ground tunnels allowed students to cross streets and enter different buildings without waiting for traffic to clear and to avoid the delay or danger of crossing high-traffic streets. These tunnels are often beneficial for the urban campus, but not necessary for the academic experience. This modern construction in addition to the shops, ATMs, convenient seating arrangements, and food court in the Campus Center are all appealing conveniences that students may enjoy but that are not required for academic success at the university.

Academic Culture

The findings below exemplify perceptions of the academic culture through artifacts found on the campus tour. Within academics, two meta-themes were extracted: academic space and out-of-classroom learning opportunities. Academic space was defined by this research team as physical and social locations that promote the acquisition of knowledge. Examples of these environments include traditional classrooms, study areas, and resource rooms. In contrast, out-of-classroom learning consists of study abroad programs, student employment positions, and civic engagement opportunities.

Academic Space. Physical evidence of academic culture can be seen through the

study spaces, classrooms, and academic support offices highlighted along the tour route. Many study spaces for quiet and group work exist on campus and were featured on the tour. Of these spaces, many had glass walls, allowing other students to see the space in use and marketing the scholarly image to tour attendees and students. The most traditional academic space, the classroom, was not highlighted on the campus tour. In fact, only one tour group physically entered a classroom during the tour. However, open doorways into classrooms existed within the hallways. It was assumed that these rooms were classrooms based on observing dry-erase boards and student desks within. These spaces were not largely featured therefore, physical evidence of active learning was not clear. Academic resource and support offices were visible in nearly every academic and non-academic space on campus. Support for students' academic success was highlighted by the Math Assistance Center, Academic Advising Office, and Writing Center. These offices were conveniently located for students along common meeting spaces such as the student center and academic buildings. Fliers corroborated this message as they encouraged students to utilize the resource offices and writing centers.

Out-of-Classroom Learning. There was an emphasis on learning outside of the classroom at the institution. Out-of-classroom learning opportunities are offered through marketing campaigns and educational opportunities that give students the ability to be immersed in experiences outside of the classroom. Examples of such experiences available include employment opportunities or cultural experiences available to students enrolled in the institution that were exhibited through fliers, television slides, and offices. These resources

demonstrate how valuable the institution considers outside classroom learning experiences. There were a number of resources and offices geared toward developing international students as well as preparing globally aware domestic students. One of the first offices seen on the tour was the Office of International Affairs. Furthermore, there was a Study Abroad Office that advertised the benefits of an experience abroad. Advertisements for student employment fairs and career preparation workshops were another prevalent aspect among the bulletin boards found around campus. There was an office devoted to the career search and preparation that was showcased on the campus tour. Quotes on the walls about creating civic-minded students and community relationships exemplified the importance believed to exist within learning experiences off-campus and in the community.

Discussion

All student affairs practitioners contribute to the culture of an institution. The posters on the walls, furniture placement, and prominence of technology in any given facility can affect a student's choice to enroll. Students may expect these existing messages to hold true once they matriculate to the institution. When there is incongruence between the messages received and the realities of the environment, the institution might present a false image and potentially mislead its students. When a campus tour is used as a marketing technique on behalf of the institution and as an initial introduction for potential students into university life, institutions must balance the act of representing the institution truthfully while simultaneously marketing the institution to attract students. This study

shows both what this institution highlighted about their campus culture during tours while also indicating the degree to which the academic mission of the institution was featured. This particular institution's lifestyle culture was found to be the primary focus of the official campus tour, and this will have an impact on how the institution is perceived by campus tour participants.

Lifestyle Emphasis

The mission of the institution is predominately academic in language but the findings suggest that there is more of a focus on lifestyle during campus tours as opposed to promoting the academic mission. Intentionally marketed ideas of lifestyle prevailed and included such elements as modern fixtures, technology and social media use, institutional pride, and community events. As Padjen (2002) notes, this may be because institutions are choosing to showcase the amenities that students are shopping for in their college experience instead of presenting a more academic focus. Physical amenities are the first thing prospective students notice as they arrive on campus; therefore, institutions may focus their efforts on highlighting physical assets (Hill, 2004). Renovation of academic buildings, social spaces, and housing to entice future students adds to the proposed collegiate lifestyle culture. Today institutions are "spending more on physical amenities, such as student centers and recreational facilities, to upgrade the academic environments as well as the quality of life" (Hill, 2004, p. 25). These points were exemplified through the modern architecture and amenities of this institution like the new Campus Center and the abundance of technology across campus. The more institutions provide these types of things, the more likely it is that they will produce a

larger applicant pool (Hill, 2004). While these physical artifacts send messages about the collegiate lifestyle, they do not suggest academic excellence.

Absence of Academics

Hill (2004) stated that schools must display what best exemplifies excellence for students and noted that they are no longer visually seeking evidence of academic practice but are instead looking to school amenities (Hill, 2004). Institutions must then decide whether their recruitment practices feature institutional goals as portrayed in the mission or student desires for modern amenities. There is an ethical decision that institutions must make to proactively recruit students to enroll: highlighting the academic mission of the institution or its collegiate lifestyle.

Fewer physical artifacts were shown in this study that indicated an emphasis on an active academic culture. For example, when in academic buildings during the tour, classrooms were either bypassed or briefly visited. Academic messages seemed to be stifled by dull advertisements for academic programs and were insignificant and hidden away from high traffic areas. In contrast, banners were visible in most hallways with quotes emphasizing engagement as a citizen. Furthermore, bulletin boards were evident in every academic building that encouraged students to attend campus and community events. Resource centers and study areas were covered with campus involvement advertisements, televisions, and windows viewing the city. These components did not emphasize academic culture but instead espoused the value for spaces to be more modern and socially accommodating rather than academically functional.

Implications

There are many implications for future research based on this study. Further research needs to be conducted on the verbal and nonverbal messages conveyed on campus tours to address the current gap in literature. It would be useful for admissions offices to know what types of messages are received and retained by students. Additionally, it would be useful to understand which cultural messages better sell an institution to prospective students- academic or lifestyle. Such research could have an enormous effect on the way higher education institutions market themselves to students through campus tours. By understanding the amenities that students expect, university staff have the opportunity to evaluate what their institution presents to students on campus tours in order to address any needs or concerns. Administrators should consider better integrating the mission of the institution to the students that the campus attracts. This could enable the institution to provide opportunities for students to develop academically while simultaneously giving them the components of lifestyle culture needed to develop outside of the classroom learning environment.

The campus tour is a pivotal experience for prospective students and for any institution's recruitment numbers (Strange & Banning, 2001; Thelin & Yankovich, 1987; Sturmer, 1973); therefore, more research is crucial if institutions hope to see their particular tour have the most effect on the prospective students attending them. Although this study focused on one specific institution, much still can be taken from its findings. Due to the single institution focus of this study, the findings cannot be generalized; however, the premise of the study is something that can be utilized by any

institution that conducts campus tours. Such institutions can assess the non-verbal messages in their physical environments to determine how those messages fit the image they hope to portray to prospective students during campus tours. Additionally, it is important for admissions offices to remember that although the verbal messages sent by tour guides on campus tours are important and valuable, they are often overpowered by the messages sent by physical artifacts observed in the environment (Eckman, 1985; Mehrabian, 1981).

Limitations

Data collection will always be influenced by human interpretation, and the researchers minimized this limitation by utilizing a variety of bias reduction and validity methods mentioned in the Methods section. Aside from personal bias, the researchers were also limited by external variables. Campus tours led by the student ambassadors may have influenced our research because the tours were ultimately controlled by the ambassador's decision to showcase or omit certain spaces. Time variables were another limiting factor of our study. Campus tours are only offered at 10:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. each weekday. This is another limitation given that this campus has a large commuter population, and the spaces may be used differently in morning hours versus evening hours. Finally, the researchers were limited by the number of tours they could attend, which impacted the amount of data collected. Regardless of how the campus tour is presented, it remains a crucial element of any student's decision-making process; campus physical artifacts and their nonverbal messages remain a critical

component worth reviewing by any admissions office.

Conclusion

Competitive colleges are able to market their institution in an alluring fashion that draws in diverse student populations. This requires intentional and educated marketing efforts. Universities should be conscientious of giving students a tour that represents institutional values while showcasing the amenities many modern students want to see. Students will make their decision to attend a university based on their impression of that institution's features and values, which are often communicated primarily through the campus tour. This site for this study strategically selects artifacts and spaces to showcase to attendees on the campus tour, and the contemporary design of the institution and its outside classroom experiences espouse a lifestyle culture waiting to be embraced. The knowledge of how students shop for colleges is definitely being utilized during the tour through a focus on certain nonverbal messages within this environment.

Ideally, the path of the campus tour and the physical artifacts observed by students intertwine to paint a vivid picture of what student life is like on campus. These physical environments and the artifacts they contain may explain how prospective students make meaning of the institution they choose to attend. From this particular institution's campus tour data, two distinct cultures of academia and collegiate lifestyle emerged. Lifestyle was found to be the most prevalent feature on its tours, and significant evidence showed that the institution may not be marketing the values of its academically focused mission. By maintaining a competitive edge through modern buildings

and technology, however, this campus may still attract a substantial applicant pool based on the needs of consumers in the market for such an institution. Administrators must be cognizant of what the campus tour route is

and which features are shown; physical artifacts and the nonverbal messages they send remain a critical component worthy of institutional review.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Example of Coding Instrument: The Campus Center

		Academic Culture		Lifestyle Culture	
		Academic Space	Out-of-Classroom Learning	Urban Climate	Strategic Convenience
Campus Center	Quiet study spaces	Study abroad office		Use of windows for light	Career services
	Neutral tones				Student employment
	Work stations	Student organization offices		Vibrant colors	Auxiliary offices in student center
	Small group v. individual areas	Bulletin boards and fliers with resources		Social seating arrangements	ATM availability
	Resource offices			Social events	Food court
	Writing center			Fireplace	Bookstore and gift shop
				Parking structure	Conference space
				Metropolitan surroundings	Relaxed student clothing
				Use of steel for art	Accessibility
				School pride	Tall open structure
				Space and colors	Multi-functional spaces
				Glass windows showcasing city	Free newspapers
					Media on televisions